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Display until March 1, 1991

Jan.-Feb. 1991 / \$3.50 U.S. / \$4.50 Canada

The Holes Where Children Lie

By Patricia Anthony

(Page 2)

The Honeymoon

By Sandra Paradise

(Page 56)

***Human Beings:
Whence Did They Come?***

By Robert A. Metzger

And Stories By:

BRUCE BETHKE

HOWARD V. HENDRIX

JOHN MOORE

DOUG FRANKLIN



The Holes Where Children Lie

By Patricia Anthony

Art by Lori Deitrick

Chuck. Chuck. Chuck.

The ubiquitous sound comes to him through his open study window. He hears it in his sleep. It is the sound of nightmare, not the heart-racing, cold sweat kind, but the grueling sort, the sort from which you fear you'll never awaken.

Chuck.

The gritting of the metal trowel against the sand makes his teeth ache, and he wants to run to the window and scream to her to stop. But he is a quiet man who has always been generous to the people around him, so he goes back to his papers.

In a little while a young lieutenant enters the room.

"Governor," the lieutenant says with a snappy salute that makes the governor think the soldier has not yet understood their predicament. "Mrs. Leeds is out in the garden, and it's raining."

Now the governor is sure the boy's comprehension is limited. Leeds nods as he scans the daily list of the dead.

"It's against your direct orders, sir. We've told her to stop, but she won't listen."

"I see," the governor says. At last he gets up, but only because it appears that the boy expects him to. His back is stiff from sitting. "I'll take care of it."

He walks out to the porch where the young lieutenant hands him an umbrella. In the yard an embarrassed, officious sergeant with a Geiger counter stands over the bent form of the governor's wife, a colorful, striped golf umbrella held over the both of them.

The umbrella is brighter than the day. The dark sheets of rain smell of oil. The low clouds are greasy. Holding his own umbrella up, the governor splashes across to where the sergeant is standing and can hear the slow, unsteady popcorn-maker excitement of the boxy counter.

"I'll take over now, sergeant. Thank you."

"Thank you, sir," the soldier says gratefully.

They exchange umbrellas and the sergeant trots back to the house.

Chuck.

At his feet his wife digs diligently with the trowel. The yard is a dense pattern of holes, as if squirrels have been at war with tiny mortars.

"It's raining, Mary," he says. "Come on into the house."

Chuck.

She does not look up. He has not expected her to. Across the yard the old holes she has so painfully dug are dissolving in the rain. Under the cover of the umbrella, she digs more, Penelope at her loom.

"Come on," he says. He takes her arm. With his help, she rises, but she won't trust him enough to hand him the trowel. He doesn't insist.

Her blank face gives no hint of emotion. Only her scarred hands do. No one but the governor knows that

they speak of guilt, not grief.

She never really loved the children. There were always too many quarrels, too many complaints. An entire card catalogue of "Can't yous."

GODDAMN, CAN'T YOU TURN THAT MUSIC OFF? CAN'T YOU CLEAN UP AFTER YOURSELF? WOULD IT KILL YOU TO WASH A DISH?

And then the "I can'ts": "I can't stand it much longer. I can't put up with them. Let's just take a few days to ourselves and go up to the mountain cabin."

She jerks his arm as if she wants to go back and dig some more. Her protest comes six months too late. He pulls her, stumbling, along. "I left them behind, and they were my responsibility, too," he whispers.

She doesn't speak, but her quick look says, *Not like my responsibility. I was their goddamned mother. Your part was easy.*

As she turns away he wonders if cats who eat their young mourn for their kittens. No one should outlive her children.

They walk up the porch steps and pass the young lieutenant. Leeds can see the bewilderment in the boy's face. He, in his limited understanding, thinks Mary digs because she has gone insane, but the governor knows the truth. Given time, given a trowel, he would dig, too.

The governor leads his wife to the bathroom and draws a bath. He undresses her and puts her in the tub. They have a small tug-of-war with the trowel, and finally he has to put it within her reach so she won't be frantic.

She sits passive as a child and lets him bathe her. He idly notices the loose skin on her arms, her thighs, the blue veins in her breasts. He cleans her as he might clean a kitchen, taking pains with the most important places, the exposed hands, the face, the hair.

When he is finished he dresses her in a robe. She takes up the trowel again. When he walks her out of the room, he sees that Colonel Glick is waiting. Glick has tracked on the clean hardwood floor. Leeds hates him for that.

Glick's face is a slick, mahogany-colored, human-shaped mask. Only the eyes move. He salutes wearily the way most of the guardsmen do.

"Go to your room, Mary," Leeds says, and watches as his wife obeys him.

"Rain's surprisingly clean, sir," Glick tells him as Mary disappears down the hall. "Not enough rads to concern ourselves with."

"Ah," says Leeds. "At least not for another twenty years of exposure, you mean."

The colonel's eyes shift behind the dark lids. "Yes, sir. Of course, sir. I've been asked to inform you that a triage crisis has arisen. There are too many Stage 2 survivors for the medication we have, so that even some of our Stage



LORI DEITRICK '90



LORI DEITRICK..90

3s are dying. Any orders on this, sir?"

"Tell the doctors to start treating by age, youngest first. Any Stage 2 over forty should be considered a Stage 1, understood?"

"Understood, sir."

"Just let them die." Leeds studies the colonel carefully, but there is no indication of criticism in Glick's face. "Any news from outside, Colonel?"

"Sir?"

"Maybe something about how the enemy is doing?"

The colonel blinks rapidly. He looks like a robot whose program has just gone awry. "Enemy, sir?" Glick seems as if he's wrestling with a problem, an odd problem for a soldier. That is because, unlike his young lieutenant, Glick is perceptive. He knows he is the enemy. All the survivors are.

"The Russians," Leeds explains patiently.

The colonel's composure splinters for an instant so that, very briefly, Leeds can see the man behind it. "We have no information that it was the Russians. A lot of countries had nuclear arsenals, sir."

"Well, I think it was the Russians. And I think they're afraid to invade. They should be. Nuclear war doesn't count on invasion. You never spoil your nest, Colonel Glick."

They walk out the door together. Leeds passes the muddy footprints Glick has left. He is not so annoyed with the colonel now that he knows the mud is simply mud and not slow death.

On the porch they pause. Across the lawn Leeds can see the small, empty graves his wife has dug. Mary, wanting so badly to bury her dead.

"Will anyone come to help us, Colonel?"

"It's doubtful, sir. Everyone has problems, and we're stuck with blasts on three sides. I have to assume they've given us up for lost, sir."

In fact they are lost, Leeds thinks. Perhaps the graves his wife digs are not graves after the fact, but preparatory.

"What were you before?" Leeds asks.

The colonel turns to him, a smooth dimple of puzzlement between the eyebrows on the mask. "Sir?"

"Part-time warrior and full-time what?" Leeds tags the colonel as a high-school biology teacher, an engineer, perhaps. Some job where his hands never got dirty.

"Computer sales rep, sir."

Leeds's lips turn up at one side and, for the first time in six months, he nearly laughs. But the humor isn't quite strong enough, and the slack muscles of his face are too heavy.

"Sales," he says.

"Yes, sir. Government contract stuff was a lot of it, sir. Component parts and things."

Leeds nods. "Computers. The Russians should have had our computers. Maybe more of their rockets would have hit the targets. Wasteful that they fused two ten-mile patches of desert. A great coyote kill, I would imagine."

"Yes, sir. If you insist on Russians, sir. But then Phoenix was hit."

"Yes." Leeds says quietly. How could he forget Phoenix?

"Whichever country struck us, that must have been an intended target, sir."

"None of it makes any sense, does it, Colonel? I suppose

we'll know who struck us and why when everything is back to normal."

Back to normal. Glick looks at him so strangely that Leeds picks up on his mistake.

Finally the colonel shrugs. "I suppose the worst part is not knowing. It was like walking to work, minding your own business, and suddenly being mugged from behind."

Leeds watches as the colonel unfurls his umbrella and walks out into the grey, oily rain. But Glick has made a mistake, too. The worst part isn't the not knowing. No, the worst part is living through it.

When the colonel drives away, Leeds goes back to his office. In emergencies, even long-term ones, there is always paperwork. With the overcast skies, the nights come faster now. In an hour he lights a candle and reads until he falls asleep in his leather chair, his head nodding to his chest.

The ring of the phone awakens him. The candle has burnt down. He gropes out in the darkness of the desk and, on the second ring, finds the receiver.

"Hello."

He's greeted by an electronic howl and a burst of static, the call sign of the jury-rigged local service.

"Hello," he says again.

On the other side of the tempest of noise he hears a faint voice. "... nor Leeds."

"This is the governor."

There is a squeal which makes him jerk his ear away from the receiver, but he has caught the worst of it. His ear canal hurts. "... wife, sir. Could you go check?"

He doesn't need to hear the rest of the message. He understands all too well. Putting the phone down, he lights a candle and walks down the hall to his wife's room. The robe is on the bed, and the bed is empty.

When he comes back he finds that the static is gone, disappeared as stealthily as his wife, and the phone connection is clear. "No. She's not here. Do you have her down there?"

"Yes, sir. We think this is her. Sorry to disturb you, sir, but she just wouldn't answer our questions. She was very determined to get through the roadblock, governor."

It would be so easy, he thinks, for him to give the order to let her go. No muss, no fuss, no body. She could walk down the highway into the grey limbo where the children wait.

But Leeds is experienced enough to know that recriminations breed in uncertainty. Responsibility ends with a corpse.

"Bring her back, please," he says to the boy with the unfamiliar voice. He has become used to giving orders to people he doesn't know; and he has become used to trusting them utterly.

"Right away, sir," the boy says. The line goes dead. The one thing Leeds will never get used to is that emptiness. He holds the receiver cradled against his ear for a moment as if he can wish back into existence the old AT&T hum.

When the driver arrives with Mary, Leeds takes her in and gives her another bath. When she is asleep, he pries the trowel from her hand and places it on the night table where she can find it in the morning.

Then he goes to Jerry's room to sleep. Each night is a different vigil in each of the three rooms. The rooms have

(Continued to page 61)

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A crazy alien

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Aboriginal Science Fiction (ISSN 0896-3198) is published bimonthly by Aboriginal Entertainment Inc. in January, March, May, July, September, and November for \$15 a year. Aboriginal Science Fiction has editorial offices at 100 Tower Office Park, Suite K, Woburn, MA 01801. (All mail should be directed to Aboriginal Science Fiction P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, Massachusetts 01888-0849.) Second Class Postage: Rates paid at Woburn, MA, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Aboriginal Science Fiction P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849. The single copy price is \$3.00 (plus 50 cents postage/handling). Subscriptions are \$15 for 6 issues, \$30 for 12 and \$35 for 18. Canadian and foreign subscriptions are \$18 for 6 issues, \$32 for 12 issues and \$44 for 18 issues. Material from this publication may not be reprinted or used in any form without permission. Copyright © 1990 by Aboriginal Science Fiction and individually copyrighted by the authors and artists who have contributed to this Jan.-Feb. 1991 issue. Volume 6, Number 1, whole copy Number 25, published in November 1990.

Aboriginal Science Fiction welcomes free-lance submissions, but all submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed and stamped envelope large enough for the manuscript's return in the event it is not deemed suitable by the editorial staff. Aboriginal Science Fiction publishes original science fiction in the form of short stories between 2,500 and 5,000 words. Payment is \$250 upon publication. Any submissions not accompanied by a return envelope and sufficient return postage will not be returned. The publisher assumes no liability for unclaimed manuscripts or other materials. Writer's guidelines are available only if requests are accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope.

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Aboriginal Science Fiction would like to thank the Daily Times Chronicle and various members of SFWA (Science Fiction Writers of America) for their encouragement and assistance. □

Short Stories

The Holes Where Children Lie
By Patricia Anthony
Art by Lori Deitrick

Page 2

Hell on Earth
By John Moore
Art by David Deitrick

Page 8

Singing the Mountain to the Stars
By Howard V. Hendrix
Art by Wendy Snow-Lang

Page 16

The Transformative Ethic
By Doug Franklin
Art by David Cherry

Page 50

The Honeymoon
By Sandra Paradise
Art by Sandra Paradise

Page 56

Appliance
By Bruce Bethke
Art by Robert Pasternak

Page 63

Departments

Cover art for The Transformative Ethic
By David Cherry

Page 1

Our Alien Publisher
By a Crazy Alien

Page 15

Our Renewal Policy

Page 23

Books

Page 29

By Darrell Schweitzer

Page 34

From the Bookshelf

Page 41

By Janice M. Eisen

Page 41

Aborigines

Page 41

By Laurel Lucas

Page 43

What If? — Science

Page 43

By Robert A. Metzger

Page 46

Boomerangs

Page 47

Through the Lens

Page 49

By Susan Ellison

Page 49

Editor's Notes

Page 49

By Charles C. Ryan

Page 55

1990 Boomerang Awards**Advertisements**

Cummings Properties

Page 7

The Aboriginal SF Anthology

Page 13

Back Issues

Page 21

A Long Time Ago

Page 28

Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine

Page 31

Classified Ads

Page 33

Bridge Publications : Fear

Pages 35-39

Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact

Page 36

Aboriginal Science Fiction

Page 45

The Aboriginal Art Gallery

Page 68

Aboriginal Science Fiction, No. 25



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Hell on Earth

By John Moore

Art by David Deitrick

The *Sikorsky* was shaking itself apart. Grogan could feel the vibrations through the soles of his feet, hear the turbine's smooth hum grow into a grating, rasping, chainsaw grind. It would fly level for a few minutes, then drop a hundred feet of altitude with jarring suddenness, sending the crates sliding around the cargo bay, still filled with a thin haze of acrid, oily smoke, and fire extinguisher halon. More smoke drifted back from the damaged cabin. He worked his way up between the crates and torn sheet metal and slid into the co-pilot's seat. "Where are we?"

Jan was jacked into the pilot's console, carefully manicured hands resting lightly on the trackballs. There were no read-outs in front of her, no holographic altitude and airspeed displays on the windscreens, but Grogan knew her eyes were turned inward, that maps and charts status readings were flashing up inside of her brain. He sat silently for two whole minutes, staring ahead into pitch darkness, feeling the copter drop and shudder and fly level, and drop again. Watching Jan's red and pink fingernails on the trackballs. Then she yanked out the plug and said, "We're not going to make it."

Grogan looked down, where black water was rushing beneath them, and said nothing.

"There's an island called Santa Bella about forty miles ahead. Used to be part of Chile. Only fourteen thousand population but they got good med tech, the deck says. And TCR."

Grogan thought of the bodies back in Valparaiso. Blank, staring eyes. Twisted limbs, slack mouths. "Good."

"Yeah. We've only got a few minutes. Get back there and dump the stuff."

"What? No way!"

"Damn it, Grogan! We must have killed a dozen people when we blew through the hospital wall. You know what they'll do to us if they find us with the soft? That's evidence, dude!"

He thought of the bodies again, dead for nothing, and he thought of the money. "Come on, Jan. We can explain the soft. Valdez has registrations, fresh IDs."

Jan's arm shot out from her side and her nails dug into his shoulder. "Grogan, listen to me." Her head was turned away from him, looking straight ahead. Through the polycarbonate windscreens a few lights showed, and a faint outline of coast.

"We're augering in. Crash landing. Forget Valdez, forget the rendezvous. All we can hope for is Regeneration. Now get rid of the goddamn software."

Grogan shrugged her hand away and went back. He squatted down beside a hatchway and popped the latches. Down below a handful of tiny lights were passing under him, white, red, and green. "Fishing boats," he said out loud, and dropped out two submachine pistols. "Happy catches, guys." He did the same with the Bianchi holsters. The explosives went next, then the safe-cracking equipment, burning bars and impact drills. Finally he smashed

the plastic medical crates open on a corner of the hatch and dumped them. The soft was packed in foam confetti that trailed behind the copter in a streaming white cloud. With the last one he took a moment to reach through the packing and pull out a microdisc. Glimmering fractal colors, iridescent red and orange, it was only the size of a dime. But the information on it, pharmaceutical research data, was worth more money than Grogan had ever had at one time, more than his father had made in his whole life. Much more than the *Sikorsky*. He hesitated, then reached into his jacket pocket. He pulled the lining of the pocket inside out and tore a hole in it. Then he slipped the disc into the jacket, between the folds of material, and patted it into place. He tipped out the last crate. The wind grabbed the red circles and white foam bubbles and in an instant they disappeared against the black water and colored lights. "Hell with it," he said, and went forward.

Jan was wearing her flight helmet when he got back. There were beads of sweat on her upper lip, but her hands were steady on the controls. The *Sikorsky* was starting to swing from side to side, metal struts groaning each time. The sun was just beneath the horizon; in the pale glow Grogan saw jagged rocks and crashing surf. The rocks were coming up awfully fast.

"We're gonna hit pretty hard?"

"Can't be helped," Jan said, not shifting her eyes.

"Did the others make it?"

"Don't know. Radio got shot up."

He buckled the shoulder harness. "Aren't you going to strap in?"

"Won't make a difference."

"Jesus Christ! Think we'll be hurt real bad?"

"We'll be killed."

"Oh."

"There's the beach."

Grogan saw a narrow strip of boulder-strewn sand fronting a palisade of sheer wet cliffs. There was no altitude left to pass over them; instead, Jan angled toward the beach in a descent that was almost a nose-dive. The turbines screamed. Something tore away in the back of the copter, and it began to cartwheel. Water, rock, then sky flashed across the window in quick succession. Water, rock, and sky.

"Pray they got TCR," Jan said calmly, and then died.

Grogan awoke in a quiet white hospital room. Ceiling fans whispered overhead, and morning sun cast long shadows from the cast-iron beds. There were seven other beds in the room; four were empty, three patients were sleeping. By his side was a bank of equipment. He'd seen it before. It was TCR.

He swung out of bed and took a step against it. Pins



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and needles seized his left leg and he sat down again. He pulled open the hospital gown and looked at his legs. The left one was hairy and slightly tanned. The right leg had three long, vertical scars. They weren't scars exactly. Three rough stripes of new, pink skin. Baby smooth. He forced himself to stand on it, and in a few minutes the pins and needles receded and he took a step. Grogan grinned. "Goddamn. It really works. Total Cellular Regeneration."

He looked at the rest of his body. There were biomonitoring, thumb-sized tabs of silver tape, stuck to his chest, neck, and wrists. The left arm seemed the same, the right one freshly scarred. Pink patches covered his torso, favoring the right side. "Least I know what side the chopper hit on." The TCR equipment was Bausch and Lomb, brand new, top-of-the-line stuff. It didn't fit with the third-world feel of the rest of the room. He opened the nightstand. The top drawer had a packet of tongue depressors. The bottom held his clothes in a plastic bag. They had been scissored off. He found his watch and checked the date. He had been here four days. Not bad.

His wallet was gone, with the credit cards and corporate ID. Down in the pocket the tiny disk was cool and smooth. He took it out and held it between his fingers.

A nurse came in, and he quickly palmed the disk. She wore a starchy white uniform and a large silver cross on a silver chain and seemed too young for the worry lines that crossed her forehead. She took the jacket from him and said something.

"Um. That's Spanish, right? *No se que dice.*"

"You must see Father Santiago."

"There was a woman with me..."

"She is well. You must go to see Father Santiago. Across the square. Here are new clothes."

"Where is Jan?"

"Father will tell you everything. You must go now."

"My ... uh ... wallet."

"You must see Father first."

He put on white cotton pants, held up with a drawstring, a white cotton shirt, and plastic sandals. There were no pockets. He held the disc against his thigh, hidden by his palm. A smart man would get rid of it. But the information on even one disc was worth a lot of money. And there was no reason to think he or Jan had been connected with the Valparaiso robbery yet. The identities Valdez had created for them were very good. He had said they would stand up for a week, minimum. Damn. Valdez would know what to do, if he was still alive.

He signed out of the hospital and found himself in a quiet plaza. The buildings were all whitewashed adobe with tile roofs. They could have been very old. Or they could have been very new. It was tough to tell with adobe. The rectory was across the square. It seemed to have very thick walls.

And no windows.

He stood in a doorway, watching the breeze blow ripples of dust across the bricks. Overhead the sun was gathering strength. It would get very hot. A boy rode by on a bicycle, a ten-speed Adidas with a graphite frame. He wore sandals, a straw hat, and an ivory cross on a silver chain. A few women crossed the square carrying shopping baskets. Pigeons strutted in the shadows. It all looked very peaceful and quaint. Grogan waited for police to show up and arrest him. None did. After a while he crossed the square. The rectory door was heavy enough to stop a tank.

He put his hand on the knob and pulled.

Five strong brown fingers dug into his arm. He let go of the door and snapped his head around. One of the shopping-basket women was clutching his wrist and speaking to him in rapid Spanish.

"No comprende."

She pointed to the door, said something, and tried to pull him away.

"No," said Grogan, resisting. "I have to go in there." This was not true. What he had to do was get Jan and get off this island. Buy passage on a fishing boat, maybe. If he could get his credit cards back. But Jan was better at these things and the nurse had said she was already inside. He pulled his arm away. "Sorry."

The woman took a gold cross on a gold chain from around her neck and put it over his head. She crossed herself, praying under her breath.

"Uh, thanks. Hey, wait a minute!" The cross was heavy. "This is real gold!" He tried to take it off, but she backed away, then turned and scuttled to the far corner of the square where the other two women were waiting. When she got there, all three crossed themselves. He looked at them. They watched back in silence until he opened the door again and went inside.

Inside was cool and lit with fluorescent lights. The floor was carpeted and the walls were paneled wood. A very young priest with a closely trimmed beard was seated at a modern desk, scanning a computer terminal. He stood up when Grogan entered and came toward him, hand outstretched.

"Señor Grogan, how good to see you." They shook hands. "I trust your recovery is complete."

"I feel okay."

"Splendid. Please sit down. What do you think of our little island?"

"Nice place. Bet you get a nice tourist business here."

"Unfortunately, there is no beach. Santa Bella is completely surrounded by the most damnable rocks. Which I think is just as well. Our isolation allows us to preserve a simpler and, I believe, more wholesome culture, free of the sin and degradation of the mainland."

"Uh huh." A monastic type.

"Now then. You are Catholic? Your friend did not mention this."

"Uh, you mean this cross? An old woman just gave it to me."

"Oh. How nice. Well, you are Christian, I trust. It doesn't matter if you aren't. Even a virtuous pagan can be saved."

Grogan decided not to count on his virtues. He groped for a faith. "Actually, I'm, uh, Lutheran." It was his father's religion. Then he mentally kicked himself. Didn't the Catholics and Lutherans have a big fight once?

"A most respectable choice. I do so like their hymns. Unfortunately, it is not likely, then, that you made a confession before you died."

Grogan shifted in his seat. What was the man getting at? "I could make a confession now, if that's what you want."

Santiago smiled patiently. "Most laudable, Señor Grogan. But we are a Catholic country, and the state of your soul at the time of your death is very important to us."

"I'm alive now."



"But you did die."

"Well, yeah, I guess."

"You were pronounced dead by our doctor and a death certificate was issued and signed. I can show it to you if you like."

"That's okay."

"I like to be very clear on this point."

"Sure."

"Señor Grogan, I see you are entitled to some explanation. If you will follow me I will make it all clear to you."

Grogan followed him down a white-painted hallway. It was lined with heavy steel doors. The doors were unmarked and had modern deadbolt locks. "Are these offices?"

"Confessionals."

Confessionals? "You know, I really have to get back to the mainland."

"I understand, Señor Grogan. Your friend said the same thing. Please bear with me. There are customs on Santa Bella that must be fulfilled before you can be allowed to leave. Laws that must be obeyed."

"Where is Jan?"

"She is being taken care of."

"What's wrong with her?"

They passed an alcove containing a narrow, deep tank of water and an altar. Santiago gestured toward it. "Last-minute baptism. I've always considered a sprinkling of water to be perfectly adequate, but some people feel safer with the total immersion."

"Yeah, right." When Grogan was a kid, a friend named Reno had been searched by the cops. Reno had had an earpatch of intra-dermal endorphins. By some very clever sleight of hand and fast, distracting patter, he had shifted the patch from pocket to pocket and from palm to palm through the entire search and hadn't been caught. Grogan hadn't really believed this story, but now he wondered if he could do the same thing with the microdisc. Just keep palming it until they were done with whatever they wanted him to do. "What's happening to Jan?"

"Señor Grogan, what do you remember of your death?"

"Well. Nothing. The helicopter crashed and I blacked out. When I woke up I was in the hospital."

"You did not have any mystical experiences?"

"I didn't float outside my body, if that's what you mean. I didn't see a long light with a tunnel at the end of it."

"I always like to ask." Santiago walked the next steps in silence, then began again. "Santa Bellans led a simple, devout existence for many years, Señor Grogan. Our economy was based on fishing, there was some sheep grazing, and a little farming. The people did not have the

What is a SASE?

Many of our readers who would like to be writers do not know what a SASE is, or when it *must* be used.

We know, because our office is filling up with unsolicited manuscripts which were submitted without a SASE. A SASE is a self-addressed, stamped envelope included with a manuscript so that it can be returned if it is not accepted. A smaller SASE is used if you don't want the manuscript or art returned and simply wish a response. SASEs are also helpful if you desire an answer to a question you might have about the magazine.

time for the unhealthy, destructive pursuits of civilization. The sordid sexuality of modern music, the futile pursuit of fashion, the dehumanizing effects of computers and modern gimmickry, all this passed us by. Then when the drilling rigs appeared and natural gas was found, we were forced to make a great decision."

"We?"

"The Church. We own virtually all of the land on Santa Bella and the offshore mineral rights."

"Right."

"So we asked ourselves, 'How can this newfound wealth best be used to serve the people without corrupting them?' And the answer, the Church fathers decided, was to provide them with modern medical care."

Grogan was starting to put it together. "I get it. So the Church controls the hospital and the TCR. Whoever gets the TCR has to come to you."

"Precisely."

"That's pretty generous. I guess there's no way your people here could afford it otherwise. But, you know, Jan and I have pretty good credit. We can afford to pay for our treatment."

"I appreciate that, Señor Grogan. We did run a credit check on you. Your wallet, incidentally, is in our safekeeping. However, there is a complication that is ethical, not financial. Ah, Father Vasques. Have you seen Father Benvenito today? I rather expected him to join us by now."

A burly man wearing surgical clothing was coming out of one of the doors. He carefully locked it behind him, then turned to Santiago and pulled off his face mask. "Carlos is out in the helicopter. There was an accident on a fishing boat and he was on call."

Grogan said, "The helicopter?"

Santiago said, "We have a Bell A90 on standby. Should a priest be needed to administer the sacraments it can lift off in four minutes."

"Jesus! I mean, wow! You guys sure take your jobs seriously."

"Sí," said Vasques gravely. "When we consider the alternatives, we must do everything we can."

"Señor Grogan, will you please come this way?" Santiago unlocked one of the doors and Grogan stepped inside. The room was about ten feet square and had a tile floor. The walls had washable plastic wallpaper in a floral print. The room had a cloth-covered sideboard and a heavy armchair. The armchair looked quite comfortable.

Except it had straps.

"Please sit down."

"Wait a minute," said Grogan. "I want to know what's going on."

The room suddenly darkened. Grogan turned around. The light from the door was blocked by two men. Big men, in monk's robes, their faces hidden in the shadow of their cowls.

"Please sit down."

Grogan sat down. Santiago took the cover off the sideboard, revealing a row of pneumatic syringes, syringes, and a block of electronic equipment with red and black leads. He busied himself with the equipment, talking as he worked.

"It was not until we installed the equipment for Total Cellular Regeneration that we fully considered the implications of what we were doing. For you see, Señor Grogan, when we save a man from death, we also save

him from divine judgment. To administer TCR to a man's corpse is to punish him, for in bringing him back to life we have kept him from going to Heaven. We have withheld from him the eternal reward for which he has long kept faith. Of course, on the other hand, we also may have kept him from going to Hell."

"So what's wrong with that? Isn't that your job, to save people from going to Hell?"

"True enough, but it is not our purpose to circumvent the will of God. Truly, Señor Grogan, without damnation, what punishment would there be for sin? And without the possibility of eternal punishment for earthly sins, how could we keep our people on the path of righteousness?"

"Oh, my God. A fanatic."

"I must ask you to refrain from taking the Lord's name in vain."

"Now, wait a minute here. I know plenty of people who had TCR. Well, not plenty, but I know some. One was even Catholic, I think. And I don't remember hearing that the Pope had any complaints about it."

"Rome is a cesspool," snapped Santiago. His voice was loud and shrill. "A neon Babylon awash in moral sewage. They have lost" He stopped and clenched his teeth. When he spoke again he was much more relaxed. "Señor Grogan, the holy office simply does not appreciate our

special situation. These people are like children to us. We have given them life; we cannot shirk the responsibility for that life. After much prayer and many requests for guidance, we resolved upon our duty. For divine judgment we must substitute temporal judgment. For divine punishment, we impose earthly punishment."

Grogan thought of the massive walls and windowless halls. He kept his voice calm. "Somehow I get the idea we're not talking about a saying a few, what are they, rosaries?"

"Hardly a substitute for Hell, I should think. We have some simple but effective punishments, although eventually we hope to recreate much of Dante's vision."

"With that?"

"Oh, no," Santiago chuckled. "Señor Grogan, you have not been judged yet. This is merely a lie detector, a polygraph. And these syringes contain truth serums. We have sodium pentathol, scopolamine, and mescaline derivatives. We also have some of the phenylethanolamines. Very new, very effective, and rather pleasant too."

"Beats thumbscrews, I guess."

"You must not think we are frivolous in this, Señor Grogan. We do not condemn a man to Hell for swearing, or shoplifting, or even masturbating. Our intention is only

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that those who have committed the most serious and venal of crimes should not be allowed to escape God's wrath."

Grogan thought of Valparaiso, the bodies, motionless. You couldn't TCR a neural burn-out. He faced Santiago and put a little bit of a quaver into his voice. "Fornication?"

"Adultery?"

"Oh, no."

"Then I don't think that will be too much of a problem. We realize that men have their needs. See, you are worrying needlessly. I'm sure we will simply have a nice little question-and-answer session, and then we will let you go."

"Father, before we start, may I use ... your bathroom?"

"Certainly. Down the hall."

Grogan rose on legs that were only a little unsteady. Santiago laid a hand on his shoulder. "This sin of fornication, my son. Was it with your friend Jan?"

"Oh, no, Father. We're just co-workers. I hardly know her, really."

The two monks led him through the door and walked him down the hall, one in front, one in back. Grogan was thinking hard. So that's what the peaceful island life did to you. Christ, what a bunch of psychopaths.

Polygraphs didn't bother him. Grogan had gone up against polygraph operators before. Good ones, too, with direct neural connections, alpha and beta wave scanners, and optical reflex interpreters. Anyone who worked for Valdez could beat them six ways from Sunday, even on inhibition-suppressing drugs. He was no stranger to drug use. Jan wouldn't talk either, not about Valparaiso. But the disc, damn it, would have to go. He couldn't have this kind of evidence on him any longer. Not with these loons around.

He passed Father Vasques pushing a cart covered with surgical instruments. Some had blood on them. He turned his eyes away. The monks took up positions on either side of the restroom door, and he pushed his way in and locked it behind him. The little room had no windows. A bare bulb lit the toilet and tiny sink. He held up the microdisc and looked at it. Faint grooves on the surface made a diffraction pattern, showing red and gold in the electric light.

"Damn you," he whispered. He tried bending it between his fingers, but it was too tough to break. He held it over the toilet but suddenly had a better idea. He pulled off the cotton shirt and wrapped it around his hand. Then he held the disc against the bulb. It took about two minutes for it to smoke, and another minute for it to blacken and bubble up. He pulled it away, leaving a sticky smear on the bulb. This disk was now a shapeless blob of plastic. He flushed it down the toilet and put the shirt back on.

He walked back to the room, confident and at ease. They had nothing on him. Lie detectors and truth serums were mostly bluff anyway. This was going to be a piece of cake. Vasques and Santiago were talking quietly in front of the room. Vasques was laughing as he spoke and Santiago was nodding. "Ah, Señor Grogan. Are you feeling better?"

"Ready when you are, Father."

"Good, good. Father Benvenito is just landing, so he will be with us in just a few minutes."

Grogan's eyes caught on Vasques's instrument cart. An open tube of electrode paste lay next to a row of stainless

steel knives. A bowl of melting ice cubes sat to one side. There was a shallow porcelain dish, half filled with blood. And something else. He bent over to look at the dish more closely. The two priests fell silent.

Red varnished oblongs, with pink half moons.

The next moment his hands were wrapped around Vasques's throat. "Fingernails!" he screamed. "You murdering bastard!" The priest fell backward, hands thrown up in surprise, Grogan on top of him. "Son of a bitch!" The priest's eyes were rolling up in his head by the time the two monks dragged Grogan off. He kicked one in the kneecap and was rewarded with two kidney punches that left him doubled over and stunned with pain. Then they forced him into the interrogation chair and strapped him down. Santiago came in, wringing his hands. "Señor Grogan, please control yourself."

"You animals! You pulled out Jan's fingernails!"

"Your friend confessed to having an abortion. That is a very serious sin and she could not be reborn without suffering for it."

"You sadistic piece of shit!"

"My son, you are only making things difficult for yourself. Please remember that she will be released in a few months and restored to perfect health."

Grogan let himself sag back into the chair. "All right, you bastards." He glared at the priest and monks defiantly. "Fire away. You won't get anything from me. My conscience is clean."

"I am very glad to hear that," Santiago said gravely. There were footsteps in the hall and he looked out the door. "Ah, Father Benvenito."

He stepped outside. Grogan heard a hushed conversation in Spanish. Then a thin, dark-haired priest wearing a flight jacket stuck his head in the door and looked at him. There was more talking, louder this time. Then a man wearing a fisherman's sweater and cap stepped in front of the door. In his hand he held a microdisc.

Grogan leaned his head back against the chair. The sailor gave the disk to Santiago. The two priests stepped inside. They were speaking to him, but Grogan didn't hear. His eyes were fixed on the disc in Santiago's hand. He saw them dropping through the cargo bay of the helicopter and the red and green lights of the fishing boats below. The lamplight glinted off the surface of the disc, and the red and gold was the color of flames. □

Moving?

If you plan to move, please let us know at least 45 days in advance of the mailing of the next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* to make sure you don't miss any issues.

That may seem awfully far in advance, but it takes about 45 days between the time we ship the mailing labels and the magazine's arrival at your home. For the March-April 1991 issue, we need to know if you are moving by December 15, 1990.

Thanks for your cooperation.

The Most Common Human Activity

The human being, at his most typical, can be found with his hand in someone else's pocket.

The most common human activity (after certain bodily functions that inhabitants of our planet must be hard-pressed to understand) is theft. Independent theft is one of the major industries of the United States, with an annual gross product of about \$12 billion. This figure puts it just ahead of radio and television broadcasting and just behind furniture and fixture manufacturing.

Theft is so common and so pervasive that it dictates much of the social structure in which human beings live. Their insurance industry, a burgeoning market in "security" devices and services, their diurnal style of life, the topology of their cities, are all (to greater or lesser degree) direct effects of the human fear of theft. Shopping malls, to take just one small example, exist primarily so that retail merchants can pool their resources and provide fairly sophisticated security (armed guards, closed-circuit television, alarm systems) for their inventories. (These places, incidentally, have evolved into something like recreational and cultural centers. Human beings have an uncontrollable attraction to piped-in music and croissants, not to mention the presence of stealable goods.)

It is quite interesting to watch human beings trying to "control" theft. As with so many phenomena I have studied here, when you give the human beings what they regard as a serious problem, they set themselves to vigorously attacking the edges of it. Although it is proportionally much larger, theft is as irreducible a part of any human system as the measurement error in a physical one. Attempts to control it consist of shifting it around. Take the lively and growing trade in house and car alarms. The effectiveness of these devices hardly matters. What is important is that when you purchase one, it comes with a sticker that enables you to advertise your purchase to the world (and thereby to would-be thieves). A human being who installs an alarm on his property is not trying to prevent theft as much as he is trying to visit it on someone else.

So far, I have only been discussing independent theft, which is modest compared to institutional theft, also known as taxation. Theft in the form of taxation accounts for nearly 1,100 billion dollars in a year in the United States, 24 percent of the country's gross national product. I couldn't even begin to estimate what it amounts to for the species as a whole.

A footnote here about definitions: not all human beings



consider taxation and theft to be one and the same. I have examined the inhabitants of the United States, and I can report there are fully 87 people in this country who would be willing to pay their taxes in the absence of any compulsion to do so. (I withhold their names and addresses to protect them from suspicion of insanity by their neighbors and keep them off various direct-mail listings.) The rest of the population, however, only pay taxes because there is somebody holding a figurative gun to their heads. To these people, if there is any difference between taxation and theft, it is only that in one case the thief wears a necktie.

The victims of taxation protest against it vehemently, incessantly, obsessively. They will reliably vote against anyone who supports an increase in taxation or the creation of new taxes. This behavioral principle has given rise to the lip-reading phenomenon. It is a strange ritual, to be sure, but in the area of taxation, a human thief can disassociate himself from the theft by requesting that the population read his lips. My advice is don't bother. After theft, the next most common human activity is lying. □

Singing the Mountain to the Stars

By Howard V. Hendrix

Art by Wendy Snow-Lang

So is every man: he is born in vanity and sin; he comes into the world like morning mushrooms, soon thrusting up their heads into the air, and conversing with their kindred of the same production, and as soon they turn into dust and forgetfulness ... To preserve him from rushing into nothing, and at first to draw him up from nothing, were equally the issues of an almighty power.

— Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Dying* (1617)

A very bright student, your brother," said Dr. Manikam, Jake's graduate advisor, as we stepped along over the puddled floor of one of the Missouri Botanical Gardens' orchid greenhouses. "A pity if we've really lost him. We were fairly close, you know — the mentor-student relationship being what it is."

"You knew about his breakdown at Georgetown, then?" I asked, fingering the tip of a long, waxy leaf.

"Oh yes," Manikam replied, gazing absently at the peach-colored flower of some obscure epiphyte. A loquacious Tamil, with a flashing smile and hair like ringlets of black silk, he seemed exotic for Missouri — though perfectly at home strolling through the humid, colorsplashed jungles-under-glass of the Gardens. "Jacob doesn't think like other people, true. His mind runs on a different track. But I don't think that's necessarily bad. As far as I could tell it never detracted from his abilities as a student — and it almost certainly enhanced his skill as a field man."

"Did he ever mention his, uh, history of substance abuse?"

Manikam nodded.

"He was quite up front about that. I gather he was self-medicating with 'naturals' after his breakdown — nutmeg, dandelion wine, morning glory seeds, datura tea, even smoking toadskin for the bufotenine. Apparently the experience helped him decide on graduate study in ethnobotany." Manikam smiled and shrugged. "I had to remind him more than once that ethnobotany is more than a search for the ultimate high, but ..." He stared at a point deep among the orchids. "Ours is still a young and somewhat arcane science, Mr. Larkin. Who knows how many of the best field researchers might not be motivated, at some level, by a quest for the hallucinogenic grail, eh?"

We stepped under a low-hanging purple-flowered liana, pushing our way through heavy steel doors to the blissfully air-conditioned white corridor beyond.

"If he has disappeared or come to some harm," Dr. Manikam sighed as he fumbled through his keys to open Jake's cubicle, "then that would be a great loss. He is a uniquely gifted field researcher."

Inside, Jake's cubicle was a stationary cyclone of notebooks and reports, folders and pamphlets and monographs and papers everywhere.

"Did he say anything about where he might be headed?" I asked, contemplating the mad clutter before

me — dreading even the thought of trying to make sense of that mess.

"I'm afraid not," Manikam replied from the doorway, looking blankly at the floor and shaking his head. "He just ... left. Without a word. At first I thought he had merely decided to start his break early, but after five weeks and still no word I began to worry. Always before he contacted us every couple of weeks or so, even when he was deep in the field. So last week I began checking around. His landlord said he'd paid off his final month's rent and moved out. When the landlord asked him why he was leaving, Jacob told him, 'It's not good for me to be around people right now.' That's when I called your family — and the police."

I nodded and lifted a sheaf of papers from the desk.

"We had him listed as a missing person as soon as you called us," I said, riffling through the papers. "But the police have gone as far as they can go. Jake's an adult, he's got free will. If he wants to drop out of sight, then there's nothing the police can do about it." I dropped the stack of papers back onto the desk, discouraged. "Any ideas?"

"None, really." Manikam shrugged. "He could be anywhere. He's recently accumulated nearly one hundred thousand dollars in grants and loans, you know. His work at Caracamuni tepui has been very well received. Quite a few granting organizations responded favorably to his research proposals."

"What's a 'Caracamuni tepui'?" I asked, staring at a satellite photo of jungle and mountain on one wall.

"You're looking at it," Manikam replied, venturing a pace or two into the office but touching nothing. "A tepui is a high mesa or plateau. Many of them are found near the headwaters of both the Orinoco and Amazon drainages. Rugged, remote places — stone islands rising up to two miles above the surrounding rainforest. Many have never been climbed. Caracamuni was thought to be one, until your brother explored its summit."

"Jake climbed this — ?" I gestured at the satellite image.

"Oh yes," Manikam smiled, brightness flashing from his dark face as he stepped further into the office. "Cut his own trail. He had a very successful expedition. More than half the species on Caracamuni's top are found nowhere else on earth, it seems. Speciation in isolation. Jacob collected half a dozen new sundews, a dozen new bromeliads. A particularly interesting new species of *Cordyceps* fungus, too."

"Really?" I asked, only half interested. I was still trying to detect something — I didn't know what — in the satellite image.

"Yes." Manikam gingerly lifted a large crystal paper-weight from atop a pile of papers. "The fungus's micro-



scopic spores penetrate the skin of various animals, then germinate explosively in their blood, sending out mycelial threads to digest everything but the skeleton. In a matter of days the fungus spawn has filled the animal's former shape with itself, leaving behind only a mummy — and fungal fruiting bodies jutting out of the corpse like parasol mushrooms. In one of his reports your brother described them as 'ghostly antennae broadcasting more spores at more hosts, endlessly.'

"Fascinating," I replied, trying to discover some pattern, any pattern, to the books on Jake's shelves. Nodding vigorously, Manikam absently turned the crystal paperweight about in his hands.

"It turned out that he wasn't the first to Caracamuni's top, though. He found a splinter tribe of the Pemon Indians up there. Separated and isolated from their fellows for many centuries, apparently. 'Ghost people,' they're called. Jacob became very fond of them. He didn't want the anthropologists and archeologists to go running all over their tepui, but I'm afraid the word's gotten out. Fash at NIU has an expedition scheduled for the spring."

Manikam placed the paperweight carefully on the desk, exactly upon the spot he'd picked it up from, then nodded his head toward the satellite image.

"If I were trying to find your brother," the scientist said suddenly, "I think I'd start there."

"Thanks," I replied over my shoulder as I opened one of Jake's notebooks. "I just might."

Dr. Manikam, though, was already gone, and I had a mountain of clutter to sift through that wasn't getting any smaller. I set to work.

Two days later — with the patient understanding of my station's news director and his expressed hope my trip might turn into some sort of feature story — I was on a jet to Caracas, Venezuela. Manikam's advice had pointed out a path and, following that path through Jake's papers, I found this among the journal entries describing his first ascent of Caracamuni:

Through endless rain and fog we've come at last to the edge of the great stone labyrinth that crowns the tepui. My guide, Juan Carillo Garza, and his Pemon assistants refuse to travel any further. They cannot explain except to talk of the "ghost people." I remind them no people are supposed to live atop Caracamuni. They say no people do, but the ghost people do — creatures who live forever in the rain, eat only what lives on dead things, and are able to call back the ancestors and all the departed. If such "ghost people" exist, I am tempted from the description to speculate. An extremely ancient tribe, perhaps? The "dead things" reference — saprophyte totemists? "Calling back the ancestors" — some natural substance that enables them to tap into the collective unconscious?

Hopeful of this, I have decided to push on without my guide and assistants for the final ascent. They have never traversed the labyrinth, so could not be much help to me in any event. If their superstitions and my suspicions prove unfounded, I will still at least be the first to climb Caracamuni summit. If there is truth to any of these "ghost people" suppositions, then there's also hope of accomplishing something of far greater importance....

Judging by the tag ends of pages still caught in the spiral notebook's wire binding, whatever entries might have followed had been hastily ripped out.

As the jet began its descent to Caracas, I pushed the notes aside at last, questions still spinning in my mind. What information had Jake been in such a hurry to destroy that he'd overlooked this entry? Manikam's phrase, "hallucinogenic grail," hovered in my mind and would not go away.

Given what I knew of Jake's ways, at least this sort of mad guess fit his pattern. The bills and receipts, though, the checkstubs and requisition slips I found among his office clutter — they didn't fit at all. What did he need with an industrial autoclave? Portable solar and gasoline-fueled electric generators? Diamond saws? Thousands of feet of power cables? Foldout satellite dishes and uplink antennas? Language acquisition and real-time translation programs? Camcorders and optidisk player recorders? Fifty microsecond TV sets — fifty!

That he'd bought such gear was odd enough, but then to have the lot of it shipped to a little nothing outpost in the middle of the rainforest — that seemed a bit too strange to be sane.

As the jet came to a halt on the tarmac, I knew that "little nothing outpost" would have to be my next destination. Shouldering my gear, I deplaned and walked through the muggy, crowded terminal to the ticket counter of a regional airline, on which I booked a flight to Amianac.

Jacob Larkin's your brother, yes?" Juan Carillo Garza asked, not bothering to look up from the figure he was carving from some dark hardwood. Having eyed me once as I approached him on the long wooden veranda outside his "offices," the bearded, heavy-set man seemed to feel no further desire to observe me. I asked him in my inadequate Spanish how he had recognized me so quickly.

"Family resemblance," Garza shrugged. "Yes, I went with the mushroom god to Caracamuni — both times — but never did I cross through that crazy maze on top!" His smile as he said it was like the blade cutting the dark wood.

"Mushroom god?"

Garza nodded.

"That's what the ghost people call your brother. They don't speak very good Pemon, but I'm pretty sure that's what they said. I saw them this time. They came right out of the rain and the maze, most of them almost naked. I stood as close to them as you're standing to me now. Saw the white threads of fungus lacing their elbows and knees, the centers of their eyes threaded blue and white. My men and I wouldn't go into the labyrinth, so they had to take all the fancy gear your brother had us haul up that tepui."

"Gear?"

Garza smiled his wood-carving smile.

"TVs. Computers. Generators. Antennas. And this thing like a big pressure cooker. Crazy. I've seen some strange things, I tell you, but watching naked little *indigenas* carrying all that shiny new electronics into a foggy maze atop a floating world — that has to be one of the strangest."

I asked him about "floating world." What some Pemons called the tepuis, he said, particularly when the tops of the high plateaus stood in the sun, above the clouds that blotted out the rest of creation below. I tried to steer the conversation back around to why they called Jake the "mushroom god."

"That I do not know," Garza said, his palms open slightly. "Unless ..." The wood-carver laughed out loud. "Your brother is very pale, right? Always buttoned up and wearing a sun hat on that wispy blond hair of his, no? Maybe his coloring reminded them of a mushroom?"

He laughed again, great deep belly laughs, until he had to dab at his eyes.

"Is Jake still up there?" I asked. "Is he still alive?" I put the question somewhat fearfully. Jake was my younger brother, after all. I didn't want to have to attend his funeral any time soon.

Garza returned his attention to his carving. It was so long before he answered that I wondered if he was ignoring me — or if he'd even heard me in the first place.

"Whether he's alive or not, I cannot say." Garza worked a particularly long shaving from the wood and sent it corkscrewing to the ground. "But dead or alive, he's still on Caracamuni tepui."

"Can you take me there?"

"Of course," Garza carved. "For a price."

"Name it."

He named a figure. I told him I didn't have quite that much cash on hand. That was okay, he assured me. He took plastic.

We canoed and portaged up river and stream for a day and a half, past flights of blue and red macaws, past bands of monkeys shrieking green waves through the forest canopy, past the fluttering flashing blue neon of what Garza called "giant morpho butterflies." I brought my hand-held video camera to bear on such sights again and again, yet somehow the very act of framing the exotic creatures in the viewfinder seemed to reduce them to mere targets, cut them out of their natural context, render them isolated, unreal. Eventually I stopped taping, content to just be a part of what was going on around me.

Packing through the jungle wasn't quite so pleasant: venomous snakes, brittle scorpions, stinging ants, ever-present mosquitoes. Air so thick with sticky steaming humidity that breathing seemed a waste of effort. Heat and dampness that turned my clothing and pack into a portable sweatlodge.

For two days more we slogged our way through wet green hell, accompanied by the sound of machetes on brush, of insects and animals and muttered human curses, and always the dripping and drumming of precipitation onto or off of the forest canopy. The trail switchbacked endlessly, and I knew we must be gaining altitude, but the forest cover did not break and I seemed to walk that green tunnel even in my dreams — when I managed to sleep at all.

Surmounting a ridge, we at last left the rainforest. As the five of us — three Pemon *indigenas*, Garza, and myself — dropped our packs and made camp, Garza pointed out one of the mountains on the horizon, a high mesa shaped roughly like a giant anvil. Caracamuni tepui, he said. A cool wind began to blow, and it blew against our tents all night long.

Over the next day and a half we made our way along the backbone of the ridge and onto the tepui itself. Though the switchbacking of the trail increased, if anything, and we always seemed to be walking under leaden skies, at least now the elevation gain became more obvious as we passed from one biome to the next in increasingly rapid

succession, the air growing cooler and cooler. Noon of the fourth trail day brought us shivering to the high mesa's top, to a place of stone black with rains that seemed to have been falling forever, a place where fog and algae and fungus were shaping, always shaping the stone. Slowly.

I looked about me. Rocks and pinnacles, columns and arches. The sort of city that time and water dream from stone. No streets, no right angles anywhere. Everything rounded — nothing straight could stay. Ancient strata already broken by lopsided eggs of sky, pierced by ellipses of fog, interrupted by ovoids and oblongs of rain. A labyrinth of stone clouds.

"Your brother is out there somewhere," a rain-dripping Garza said, gesturing toward the heart of the maze. "Forty square miles of it. My men and I, we go no further."

I nodded.

"I'm going on. Remember — you've all signed on for another week. I'll keep in radio contact and return within three days at most."

"We'll wait," Garza muttered. "Three days — that long and no longer. May God go with you."

Like a wet ghost I drifted into the forest of rainblack stones. All afternoon I walked there, west to east across Caracamuni tepui, across that island of stone floating among the clouds, raindesert island above rainforest sea. The more time I spent alone there the more the place seemed both haunted and holy, sanctified by isolation. Everywhere stood the dark rainsoft contours of the ancient stone: two-billion-year-old geological ruins, nightmare temples, alien cathedrals. Stonehenges and Sagrada Familias dribbled like children's slurry castles onto an anviltop two miles up, left to harden, then wash away forgotten. A maze for a minotaur to feel at home in, and the girl Ariadne with her clue of thread....

For a moment the rain and fog thinned. I saw what looked like a young woman in the distance. Bronze skin, dark breasts, long dark hair. I blinked and she was gone. A nearly naked woman — in this wet cold? I must be losing it. Time to stop.

Taking shelter beneath the large overhang of a mushroom-cloud rock, I shed pack and gear and wet clothes and climbed into a merely damp sleeping bag. In the thundering sky of late afternoon I fell asleep.

When I woke the rain had stopped, a subtle miracle. I climbed out of my cocoon to dry naked and new in the orange evening sunlight. Around me still stood the myriad softhard shapes of the maze, a dreamscape refusing to disappear upon waking. The sun was setting behind bars of clouds, smearing slanting light on ancient stones, suffusing the maze with a melancholy old as the universe, a twilight of men and gods, of worlds and time.

Yet even there in that barren place where rains fell so violently upon the plateau's top as to drive the very nutrients from the earth — even there the gravel was dotted with pocket Edens, swampy rockgarden-sized oases. I made my naked and tenderfooted way among them, the first man returned at evening on the last day. I felt cleansed, free, but also, somehow, *watched over*.

I put that odd sensation out of my mind and tried to find some contentment amid the stark beauty of the place. When the sun was nearly gone and the long mountain twilight was underway in earnest, I started back toward the sheltering overhang where my empty sleeping bag sprawled. I had not covered much territory that day, it

was true, but I held better hopes for the morrow. Remembering that the satellite image had shown some sort of cleft or abyss bisecting the labyrinth top into two neat hemispheres, I convinced myself that there was most likely cloudforest at the bottom of that depression. If Jake was to be found anywhere up here, I was sure it would be there.

In the gathering dark I radioed in to Garza and his men. They sounded happy and relieved to hear from me — and more than a little surprised.

The morning sky when it came hung gray as lead and heavier on my spirits than the damp musty pack and clothes upon my body. Half asleep I renewed my trudge through the foggy senseless maze, the shumanness of the place working on my imagination. At times I felt as if I were walking through the sleep of some great slow mind, an interloper into eons-long dreams and nightmares I could not even begin to understand. As the leaden morning wore on, the rain and fog and algae and fungus shaping the labyrinth seemed to be shaping me too, slowly covering my runneled face with lichens and mosses....

I stopped abruptly. Ahead, leaning against a house-sized boulder and warily observing my approach, was the young woman — girl, really, perhaps sixteen at the most — whom I had seen the previous day and written off as a phantasm of my overtired brain. I stared at her, both of us in that instant motionless as the stones around us. Her presence up here alone was just too improbable — but in this great jumble of rocks disappearing in and out of fog and cloud, a human figure was clearly discernible at fifty yards, a locus of perspective if nothing else.

I began to walk slowly and steadily toward her. In response she moved on ahead of me, disappearing and reappearing like an apparition, always just ahead, the force of her presence moving me in the direction she wished to go, moving me out of the thickest of clouds.

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1A. Title of Publication: *Aboriginal Science Fiction*. 1B. Publication No. 008-8195-2. 2. Date of Filing 10-10-90. Frequency of Issue: Bi-monthly. 3A. No. of issues published annually: 60. 3B. Annual subscription price: \$15. 4. Correspondence address: 100 Tower Office Park, Suite K, Woburn, MA 01801. 5. Complete mailing address of the headquarters of the general business offices of the publisher (not printer): Absolute Entertainment, Inc., d.b.a. *Aboriginal Science Fiction* P.C. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849 (100 Tower Office Park, Suite K, Woburn, MA 01801). 6. Full name and complete mailing address of publisher, editor and managing editor: PUBLISHER: Absolute Entertainment Inc., P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849 (100 Tower Office Park, Suite K, Woburn, MA 01801). Editor: Charles C. Ryan, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849. Managing Editor, Name: 7. Owner: Full Name: Absolute Entertainment Inc., P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849 (100 Tower Office Park, Suite K, Woburn, MA 01801). Stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock: Charles C. Ryan, Mary C. Ryan, Daniel D. Kennedy, Paul J. Haggerty, James D. Haggerty III, Peter Haggerty, Richard A. Haggerty. Address of Stockholders: P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849 (100 Tower Office Park, Suite K, Woburn, MA 01801). 8. Known bondholders, mortgages and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities: Name: 9. Does not apply. 10. Nature and nature of ownership: Single or copies circulate annually preceding 12 months. A. Total no. of 25,000. B. Total no. distributed outside the United States, Canada and territories: 5,677.2. 11. Total distribution: 15,200 C. Total paid circulation: 20,700 D. Free copies: 105 E. Total distribution: 20,804 F. Copies not distributed: 5862 G. Returns from News Agents: 17,150 G. Total: 30,050. Actual no. of copies of single issue published monthly to filing date (Nov.-Dec. 1990) 10,000 I. Total no. of copies: 28,000 J. Paid circulation: 1,100 K. Sales through dealers and carriers: 3,110 L. Mail subscriptions: 10,802 C. Total circulation: 10,918 D. Free copies: 187 L. Total distribution: 20,105 F. Copies not distributed L. Office use, left over, 1,801 2. Returns from News Agents: 0,034 G. Total: 28,000. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

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Where the young woman stopped the maze broke off and a cloud-filled gorge came into view below us. At its edge stood something even more strange and wonderful: a blond, bearded, fishbelly-white man, clad in tattered shorts and gym shoes and straw sunhat, clipboard in hand on the brink of the abyss, adjusting the angle onto heaven of a satellite dish.

"Jake!"

Turning startled eyes toward me, my brother jumped back so quickly I was afraid he would plunge over the edge and disappear. He caught himself just this side of catastrophe.

"Who — yes?"

I strode forward and gave him a strong full hug, thinking how strange it was to see him shirtless, knowing how embarrassed he had always been by his girlish large-nipped pectorals. He stared at me a moment then averted his eyes — just as he always had.

"Paul. Well. This is a surprise."

"You're telling me! What the hell do you mean, disappearing like this?" I found my voice quavering with strong emotion. "What are you doing up here? Have you completely lost it or what, bro?"

"No." His eyes flickered contact for only an instant before turning away toward the gorge. "I think I've found it, actually. If you'll come with me I'll show you."

His work on the satellite dish apparently finished, he called out, "Talitha," and waved the young woman on ahead of us. As she led us swiftly downward into the fine cloudmist that obscured the abyss, I was close enough to see that, though Talitha wore only a loincloth, the loincloth was masterfully intricate in its design. She followed no path that I could discern, though for a while I thought she seemed to be ranging along the cable from the dish antenna — until that line darted off on its own into the increasingly dense undergrowth. By then I could hear water flowing and falling with almost musical cadence as we made our way into and under the tree canopy, through ever denser cloudforest growth, downward among misted and dripping lianas and orchids and epiphytes of a thousand kinds, the sound of a waterfall growing steadily to a roar, then to a thunder, blotting out everything else.

Our young guide seemed almost to dance over the slippery downed trees that forced the torrent at the gorge's bottom. Jake crossed them in his game, gangly way and I in my much less surefooted one. Somewhere downstream the torrent turned to waterfall, thundering into empty space, sending back up the gorge to us a twofold sound like an immense echoing heartbeat. Stepping down onto the rightside bank, we continued east along what was more and more obviously a footpath. After following the path for a time we came to a true trail and veered sharply up a small branch canyon, where the smoking thunder of the falls at last receded enough to allow the insect and animal sounds of the forest to return.

"Where are we headed?" I asked.

"To introduce you to the people I'm staying with," Jake replied, keeping his eyes focused on the ground in front of him as we hiked along.

"I thought you told your landlord it wasn't good for you to be around people right now."

His eyes flickered over me oddly for an instant, then he shrugged and looked away.

"Maybe I meant white North American people —"

"— who don't think you're a god," I said with a smug and knowing nod.

"What do you mean?"

I told him what Garza had said about the "mushroom god" — his speculation as to why the Caracamuni *indigenas* applied that term to Jake, too. Jake laughed a series of breathy smirks.

"That's not it at all," he said, shaking his head. "These people speak a very old language, a sort of ur-Pemon — when they have to speak at all. What Garza translated 'mushroom god' is more accurately something like 'spawnbroker'." He smiled slightly, as if at some private joke. "Of course translation's not such a problem anymore. To us and their children they can speak Spanish and English perfectly well — French, Russian, and Japanese, too."

"What?"

"You'll see."

Gradually, as we gained elevation again, the mist cleared around us and the jungle thinned perceptibly. The air had again started to cool considerably when we encountered several foot-trampled pathways converging on an earthen slope beneath a high cliffside. In the cliff face were some half-dozen holes or caves from which a brisk wind issued steadily. From out of the forest on both sides of the gorge powerlines and cables snaked — purposeful vines of black, gray, and red, all headed toward the cliff-holes. In the wind I thought I heard the muffled sound of motors and smelled ... exhaust?

"The gas-powered generators," Jake said. "We don't like to use them, but sometimes we have to. We've got solar generators on the plateau's top, but even there the sunlight levels are pretty erratic, so we've got the gas ones for steady backup power."

Talitha came to a stop before the holes. As if at some silent call, heads began to thrust up out of them, then torsos and entire bodies — largely unadorned but for the occasional intricate loinclothes and, incongruously, headsets.

"Where's Kekchi?" Jake called as we scrambled up the earthen slope.

"In the Cathedral Room," several bronze, gap-toothed faces replied. Nodding, Jake climbed up into the mouth of the cave toward which the greatest number of cables and powerlines converged.

"Kekchi's the 'wise one,'" Jake explained as he snatched a flashlight from among several resting on a rock ledge near the entrance. I dropped my pack and, following his lead, grabbed a light source for myself. Proceeding down a slantwise tunnel, we left the muffled thrum of generator motors behind, then passed through rock honeycombed with innumerable small side chambers. Into about a dozen of these alcoves snaked powerlines and cables, and from those particular chambers faint light of various colors spilled.

Intent on reaching the Cathedral Room and this Kekchi person, Jake set a good pace, so I caught only glimpses of what was going on in the side chambers. What I saw, though, was strange enough. In one room several *indigena* children watched a Chinese television documentary on Han dynasty artifacts — real-time computer-translated into French. In another chamber a young man watched an American news broadcast about an Indian monsoon. In a third chamber a young woman

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checked an enormous crystal column for flaws as it flowed out of a high-pressure extrusion autoclave and into the long tunnel. Beyond the column's end someone was carving up quartz bricks with a diamond saw. In another alcove a small group of youngsters seemed to be randomly sampling musical forms from various times and places — madrigals and rap, Tibetan temple gongs and rock 'n' roll, Sufi chants and Europop and worldbeat.

Other chambers were outside my experience. A boy and an older sat before computer terminals, running through what looked like extremely complex mathematical equations — at unbelievable speeds — while in the next chamber what might have been starcharts and astrogation data darted across screens before a half-dozen operators of various ages.

Fascinated by what I was seeing but fearful of what it might mean, I wanted to see more, but by then we were through the holed rock and the tunnel had opened out into an enormous underground space, a chamber of unbelievable dimensions, lit vainly here and there by the stars of arclights and carbides and "tinder bush" fires — but mostly rising away everywhere into cool damp darkness. Somewhere shadowy light glimmered off crystalline rock scattered about the floor of the great space, and water dripped in a symphony of echoes.

"The Cathedral Room," Jake said, staring out into the enclosed vastness.

"Unbelievable," I marveled. "I didn't think there could be this much space underground!"

"It's big for a single-cave chamber," Jake agreed, moving along down a slope toward the floor of that space. "Not the biggest, though. That one's beneath the jungles of Borneo — 530 million cubic feet. This one's only about a fourth that size. Big enough for our purposes, though."

"What purposes?" I asked, starting down the slope after Jake.

"Why, as a resonating chamber, of course."

I was about to ask *Resonating for what?* but Jake was already down the slope and moving across the faintly sparkling floor, striding toward a gray-headed person stooping among the source of the glimmer — which, as I came closer, I saw to be piles of quartz.

"Hello, Kekchi," Jake called to the grayhead. "My brother Paul's come."

"Hng," the stringy old person grunted, tossing a rock crystal into a bucket. Even as we got closer I could not determine with certainty whether Kekchi was an old man or an old woman. Dressed in a full loose robe of the same intricate weave or knit as the loincloths I'd seen earlier, Kekchi showed only a genderless old age — a longhaired, gaptoathed, chinfuzzed, slackbreasted, brighteyed ageless age.

"A lost brother come to find a lost brother," Kekchi said, straightening up and turning toward me eyes like white agates rippled with blue and brown. The high raspy voice did nothing to clear up my confusion. If anything, that confusion worsened, for the voice sounded distinctly creaky with neglect, as if its possessor didn't have much use for speaking. "A found brother come to lose a found brother — as one of the lines would have it. Wondering what we're about here, too. Isn't that right?"

"I don't know anything about 'lines,'" I said, fighting down the uncomfortable sensation that for Kekchi our meeting was something that had always already hap-

pened, "but yeah, I am trying to make sense of all this."

"Then you'd better learn something about lines!" Kekchi cackled.

"Lines, threads, strings," Jake tried to explain. "Patterns of possibility."

Old Kekchi spat and picked up another handful of crystalline rocks to sort through.

"Now how's he going to understand that when he's never been in mindtime, eh?"

"Mindtime?" I grew still more confused, admiring what Jake and these people were apparently accomplishing, but uncertain of its source or end.

"Where you go to talk to the ghosts!" said the wise one. "Speak with ancestors!"

"Outside normal spacetime perception," Jake added hopefully.

They looked at me expectantly, but I was blank.

"He doesn't understand," Kekchi said sorrowfully, wearily. "Always we must explain." Abruptly the grayhead began to chant — a strange low sound, atonal yet harmonious.

"The Story of the Seven Ages," Jake said slowly. "Their cosmic myth. I can only do a very rough translation into English, but I'll try."

The strange chant rose and echoed in the cavernous chamber. Jake translated.

In the void of endings, the spore of beginnings bursts into spawn. The threads of spawn absorb the voidstuff and knit it into stars. Stars release spores, the spores burst into spawn, the threads of spawn absorb starstuff and knit it into worlds. Worlds release spores, the spores burst into spawn, the threads of spawn absorb worldstuff and knit it into life. Living things release spores, the spores burst into spawn, the threads of spawn absorb lifestuff and knit it into minds. Minds release spores, the spores burst into spawn, the threads of spawn absorb mindstuff and knit it into worldminds. Worldminds release spores, the spores burst into spawn, the threads of spawn absorb worldmindstuff and knit it into starminds. Starminds release spores, the spores burst into spawn, the threads of spawn absorb starmindstuff and knit it into universal mind. Universal mind, the void of endings, the void that has taken all things into itself, releases the spore of beginnings, the fullness that pours all things out of itself.

The chant echoed away into the cave. Kekchi turned back to sorting through the mounds of quartz. Jake's eyes flickered at me an instant, after he'd stopped translating.

"That's a pretty good 'rough translation,'" I said, obscurely embarrassed. "But what's spore? What's spawn? And what's it got to do with anything happening here? The whole thing sounds too pat to me."

Jake stared off into the cavernous emptiness, but in the light from the flashlights his eyes seemed to shine with a dark brilliance. A torrent of words, frustrated yet determined, poured forth from him like the waters of the thundering fall leaping away into space.

"It's got everything to do with it! Everything for them is spore and spawn and fruiting body — and the darkness or void that comes before and after and always is. Translated into the myth-language of science, 'void' is the perfectly uniform universe without matter, just time and the enormous blank sheet of space with its potential for gravity. In the first age, spore and spawn and fruiting body are Big Bang and superstrings and first-generation

stars. In the second age, spore and spawn and fruiting body are the matter of those stars blown off in the bursts of explosions and gravity's configuring of that new matter — some of it condensing into planets. In the third age, spore and spawn and fruiting body are the vulcanism of some of those planets spewing out early atmosphere, proto-organics threading out and chaining up, eventually developing into the self-organizing life of the cell. In the fourth age, spore and spawn and fruiting body are reproduction, the threading out of DNA and RNA that make evolution and the panoply of life possible — and eventually the knitting of all that into consciousness, into mind. In the fifth age, spore and spawn and fruiting body are ideas, bedding out into roads, trade, civilization: lines of print and code, railroads and selanes and glidepaths, powerlines and telephone wires, broadcast channels and fiberoptic cables, microcircuits and rocket trajectories — some carrying sudden mushrooms, some carrying satellites to move the great invisible threads of information absorbing everything."

He glanced at me as if for some confirmation I could not give, then went on.

"The thick spawn of the world we grew up in, Paul, the world at the end of the fifth age, always on the brink of mushrooming up into cataclysm — or into worldmindfulness. In the sixth age, spore and spawn and fruiting body are interstellar ships, galactic civilization, eventual star-mindfulness. In the seventh age, spore and spawn and fruiting body are intergalactic travel and civilization and at last universal mindfulness, the emptiness able to contain the fullness of everything, perfect and uniform, that in the exact instant of its perfection releases the spore that bursts outward again into spawn. Men and universes die, Paul, but the spawn goes on and on!"

His dark brilliant eyes flickered toward me and away, and in that instant, my instant, I was certain he was insane.

"Bro, that's crazy stuff," I said shaking my head, feeling like a very minor actor on the great stage of that enormous room. "I don't know how these people have warped you, but we've got to get you out of here."

"He doesn't understand," Kekchi said, looking up from a pile of crystals and speaking to Jake about me as if I weren't there. "Let's show him. Come."

Kekchi took Jake's flashlight and strode away into the quartz-heaped and boulder-strewn immensity of the Cathedral Room. Jake followed, so I did too — reluctantly. We walked over and around and beside mounds of stone slabs, sloughed from the cavernous room's ceiling, somewhere far up in the darkness above us, ages ago. We passed onto a broad, more or less level plain from which a great ring of quartz columns rose off into the darkness, each column wreathed at intervals by spike-halos of quartz points floating suspended in the air. Passing into the great ring, I could not help thinking of the columns as pillars in a tremendous airy cathedral, flying buttresses to nowhere, holding up only the dark subterranean sky.

We made our way over a plain of organic muck bordering what looked like a shallow lake, or perhaps a place where a slow-flowing stream broadened out in a wide channel. The muck dragged and sucked at our feet as we squelched over it, weighing us down, turning our footsteps to lead. The water when we waded into it was mercifully shallow, not more than a foot deep at most, and somehow

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the bottom underneath it seemed firmer.

Kekchi stopped and pointed the flashlight toward what looked to be an island in the center, a raised space like a long low hummock.

"Here!"

Splashing, I hurried forward to the island's edge to get a closer look at whatever it was Kekchi's beam was falling upon.

What I saw horrified me. The island was clearly the burial grounds of the ghost people, but so crowded with the dead that it seemed made of bodies, corpses preserved by the cave's stable environment. From the heads of the fresher corpses grew fresh fungus — weird mushrooming stalks like vertically stretched convoluted brains, thrusting up like alien phalluses from open choking mouths, from ears, from eye sockets. Particularly large specimens jutted up from the corpses' abdomens, just below the rib cage, and fine masses of cottony white threads spread and knotted over the surface of each corpse's skin.

While I stood in shock Kekchi reached down and ran a fine white-lined finger inside one of the brain mushroom's convoluted pits. The fingertip he poked at me was covered with a bright bluish dust.

"Spores," he said, blowing the dust carefully from his finger, back onto the island. He reached down and snatched up a plug of the loose, white filamentous threads from where they grew off a body into the surrounding organic muck and humus of the island. "Spawn."

"Vegetative phase mycelium," Jake added, in unnecessary translation. Kekchi reached down a third time, plucking the convoluted stalk-fungus from a corpse's eyesocket.

"Vertical fruit of the horizontal tree," Kekchi said reverently, thrusting at my face the fleshy thing, pitted and ridged, whitish in color overall but deepening to pale blue in the pit areas and crowned by a blondish fuzz on top.

"Oh my god," I moaned, the fungus's damp rich smell wafting into my nostrils, stirring a mounting wave of nausea in my guts.

"Ours too," Kekchi said with a crooked smile, biting off a hunk of the thing, chewing and swallowing it, then belching the breath of death into my face. The wave surged up uncontrollably, dropping me to the mud on my hands and knees, projectile vomiting again and again, my guts heaving and twisting until there was no more to be wrung from me. At last I sat back on my knees in the muck, wiping from my mouth and chin the mucus and filth and bitter bile I had brought up, smearing it heedlessly on my arms above my muck-caked hands.

"They're mushroom cultists!" I blurted at Jake.

"Of course," he said matter of factly, crouching down beside me, seemingly oblivious to the gastric apocalypse I'd just endured. "These mushrooms and particular quartz crystals are their major totems. They've been collecting fine Brazilian quartz of a particular 'resonance' for nearly a thousand years. Rite of passage for everyone in the tribe — the only time they leave the *tepui*. By the time I arrived, they had several metric tons of the stuff stored here, waiting. As for the fungus — well, it sort of collected the people."

"Collected them?" I gazed past them to the corpse yard around us. "Killed them, you mean."

"Not at all," Jake said evenly, shaking his head at me,

though his eyes were elsewhere, as always. "I've studied the fungus's life-cycle. Paul. Collected dozens of spore prints, analyzed the spawn and the fruiting bodies — and talked to the people, too. They've been expecting someone who looks like me for a long time, so it was easy. The fruiting bodies, the 'mushrooms,' only appear like this after the person dies. The sacred fungus is a mycneural symbiont. After someone ingests the fruiting body, the spores germinate and the spawn forms a sheath of fungal tissue around the nerve endings of the central nervous system. Some of the fungal cells penetrate between the nerves of the brain and brainstem, without damaging them. The relationship is mutually beneficial: the fungal spawn obtains moisture, protection and nutrients even in adverse environments, and the human hosts are assured a steady supply of the most potent informational substances imaginable —"

"Drugs," I croaked from my place in the mud. "You mean drugs."

"If you wish," Jake shrugged, his eyes darting along the crystal columns that ringed us round in the middle distance, glinting dimly in the light of distant tinder bush fires and carbide gleams. "I prefer to think of them as 'adaptogens.' The 'side effects' are interesting, at least. The DMN, the dorsal median nuclei in our brains, functioning as a sort of 'governor' on the level of brain activity, keeping that level down to low percentages of total possible activity. It's your body's way of stepping on your mind. The mycneural complex, though, circumvents the DMN, allowing consistent high-level brain activity without burnout or any apparent ill effects. At such levels of brain activity, parapsychological phenomena become commonplace: clairvoyance, second sight, forays into mindtime, a very clear sense of the patterns of possibility backward and forward in spacetime."

Jake sketched complex patterns in the dirt with a finger while at the same time gazing off toward the line of crystalline columns. I felt too queasy and incredulous to say anything. He went on.

"Full development of the mycneural symbiosis takes about twelve years, but once that's achieved human hosts with full networks become natural telepaths with each other — immediate information transfer, mind to mind. Among them, language is for children, for only children have need of it." He sketched patterns faster and faster, denser and denser, never looking down at them. "Most importantly, though, is that even when I experienced mindtime for the first time, I realized that it tapped into a type of collective unconscious I never suspected. You see, the spawn remembers."

"Remembers what?" Disheartened and frustrated, I felt the cool muck chilling my legs, the realization slowly sinking in that my brother already had those things growing inside of him.

"Everywhere it's been," Jake said, now drawing great circles again and again in the mud, "and it's been just about everywhere. Because it remembers, its hosts remember too; As far as I can tell, it's never been discovered anywhere else on Earth, but what the spawn remembers proves it's not endemic to Caracamuni *tepui* — or to Earth, for that matter."

"What?" I asked, rubbing my begrimed hands on my pants. I feared that Jake was about to launch into another crazy scenario, and my fear did not prove unfounded.



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SANDRA LANE

"Look, this plateau is shield rock, 1.8 billion years old. The spawn remembers how it got here, tens, maybe hundreds of millions of years ago. It was part of a contact ship from a sixth-age civilization, a craft that ran into trouble near the Oort cloud at the edge of our solar system. The ship was crippled and began falling toward the sun. Its fully myconeuralized crew came from diverse worlds, but for all their experience they couldn't save their vessel. Understanding their situation, they decided to attempt a spore crash on a world that looked as if it might someday harbor intelligent life. In the attempt most of the ship burned up in our atmosphere, but the crew was still successful: they had managed to seed the planet with spores, which germinated and spawned and fruited, to spore again."

"I thought they lived inside people," I said tiredly, sensing that I was losing this wrestling match with my brother's grand delusion.

The fungus can survive without a myconeural association, though it is not nearly so robust as these you see here. Its long-term genetic stability and survival chances are greatly reduced outside a host. But 'long-term' is exactly what happened. A long time passed. Incident radiation and corresponding mutation rates were greater than it would normally have experienced before it found an intelligent host. Throughout most of the world it changed, evolved, became denatured. In some places it developed into ascomycetous fungi, the ancestors of morels and truffles — still delicious like the original form, but unable to generate myconeural spawn networks upon ingestion. Elsewhere its spawn networking evolved into totally parasitic forms, as in a number of *Cordyceps* species. In still other places aspects of its informational substances survived in much degraded form, particularly in the *Panaeolus* and *Psilocybe*. Only in a few shielded places — particularly in caves — did anything like the original strain survive. Even there, though, changes occurred and gradually the pure strain died out nearly everywhere, though I'm prone to believe that a moderately pure strain hung on at Lascaux cave in France until about ten thousand years ago —"

"Gone, everywhere but here," Kekchi put in, frustrated with the unwieldiness of language but unable to avoid adding another voice to the tall echoing darkness of the cave. "A thousand years ago my people came to live here. What you call refugees. Inside this cave, inside this tepee, they found the sacred mushroom, ate it, joined with it."

"Full myconeural symbiosis," Jake said, nodding, gesturing. "It's their centuries-long familiarity with midtime that's impressed upon them the importance of collecting quartz of a particular lattice configuration — for that time when they will 'sing their mountain to the stars.'"

"That time has now arrived," Kekchi intoned. "All the signs agree."

"That's what all this is about, isn't it?" I said, smacking my forehead with the palm of my left hand, rising shakily to my feet. "These people have been collecting rocks for a thousand years because mushrooms told them to? And you believe that? How much of this crap have you eaten? It's pushing you over the edgeless edge, bro. We've got to get you out of here, get this fungus stuff out of your system —"

"No, Paul." Jake shook his head and slowly rose from

his squatting position to stand upright. "The work is not yet finished so the tribe can leave."

"What work?"

Jake turned away, looking into the dim reflection of the columns upon the water's surface.

"We must finish fabricating the quartz information drivers. Information is everything — the spawn memory makes that clear. The universe is information, gravity is an expression of it, matter and energy are two states of it — but information underlies and shapes it all. We're pulling as much information down from the satellites as we can and pumping it into our minds wide open, shaping it and casting it from midtime into the structure of these quartz collecting columns you see around us, the ones we fashioned with the autoclave I brought, columns grown upon the seed crystals with the most appropriate crystalline structure —"

"The rock we have revered for ages," Kekchi interjected, "for its ability to capture and strengthen the subtle energies of mind!"

"Impossible!"

"No — real!" Jake said with manic assurance. "A cruder level of it can be seen in the piezoelectric effect, by which quartz and similar materials translate mechanical force into electrical energy, and vice versa. But crystalline quartz of proper lattice configuration and sufficient size can also receive and amplify mental energies and translate them into motive forces. Once we have sung and thought critical information densities into these collectors, they will translate and amplify it so we can dissociate ourselves from the gravitational bed of local spacetime. Then we can join in the great Cooperation, the telepathic harmony of all myconeuralized creatures throughout the galaxy —"

I shook my head in disgust and began to pace heavily in the mud, a swelling rage rising in me, bringing with it all the memories of all Jake's strange times.

"I thought you were acting crazy when you said you were getting secret personal messages from commercial radio stations! I thought you were acting crazy when you said you were under surveillance by a secret conspiracy of nuns and social workers! But this — this is the craziest of all!"

In a sudden fury I ran about on the death island, kicking fiercely at those mushroom phallus-brains growing up out of their corpsebeds. Again and again I kicked, corpse after corpse. The fungal fruiting bodies split apart like tender new flesh against my muddy bootclad feet.

When breathless I at last stopped, I saw Jake had plopped down in the mire and was rubbing tears from his eyes.

"You'll never understand, will you?" he moaned. "Yeah, you're right — out there I am crazy, a freak! Always trapped between what I am and what I'm supposed to be! Always letting people down! No more! This is my world now, these are my people. It's better here! Paul, get beyond your demons! Don't you see? We were meant to be telepaths, part of the Great Cooperative, but we went wrong, we developed consciousness and intellect without the fullness of empathy we misname telepathy. All the wars and brutality of human history are proof of that wrongness." He turned to me, almost pleading. "The contact ships missed us, but now we have a chance to gain our rightful inheritance, our place in the bliss of the

Cooperation! Stay with us — come with us!"

"What? And end up a flipped out fungus-head with a parasite mushroom growing inside my skull? Like them? Is that the kind of life you want?"

"They're happy!" he shouted at me, turning reddened eyes on me — eyes that would not break contact, would not flicker away this time, no matter how much I might have wished it. "We're happy! What kind of life would I have out there in your world? In and out of institutions all my life, dosed up on 'meds,' watched over by high-school dropout 'psychiatric aides' in case I 'go off' — giving them the chance to execute a well planned 'take down' so they can strap me into a floor-bolted cot in the 'time-out' room? No thanks. Nor while there's even a chance of freedom and the stars."

I felt like crying.

"Jake, we've never institutionalized you. All I want to do is take you home."

"This is my home," he said, turning away. "Leave me here, or leave me alone."

I turned away too then, plodding through the shallow water, squelching back tiredly through the plain of muck, flashlight flickering before me in the hollow emptiness of the cave. I came onto solid ground again and kept walking, never looking back, though I could hear the echo of that old spawn sibyl, that shaman Kekchi, saying something about leaving soon, about how things didn't have to be perfect, they just had to be *done*.

As I passed between two crystal pillars in the great ring of the same, I wanted to be like Samson, to snatch my brother from the ghost people's embrace, then send their crystal mushroom cathedral crashing down about their heads. But it could not be. I knew Jake would never consent to come back with me.

Approaching the exit tunnel through which I'd entered, I saw the people from the sidechambers streaming down into the Cathedral Room, their work apparently done for the day — save for the group cheerfully carrying a lengthy crystalline column. The children chattered back and forth with incredible rapidity, while among the adults not a word passed — though I had the distinct impression that they were communicating with each other without at all appearing to do so. Though there couldn't have been more than forty of them, somehow I sensed that they represented the total numbers of the tribe.

At the mouth of the exit tunnel, I at last stopped and turned around. The other tribesfolk were moving into the ring of crystal columns, toward Jake and Kekchi on the island of the dead in the center of the slow lake. I watched them as they gathered together in a circle of clasped hands, the living among the dead. They stood motionless for a time, until at last an otherworldly chantsong began to rise from them, atonal yet harmonious, unnerving yet hypnotic, reverberating upon the crystal columns and the far-away walls of the cave, weaving and knitting and concentrating the echoes, all sounds, my attention, my focus, my very thoughts, until I seemed to see light pulsing through the pillars, iridescent blues and salmon pinks, beating in time to that song of piercing sensitivity, of painful beauty, eternal seductive lassitude and the horrible mushrooms in their midst —

I turned and fled, fearful for my sanity. Stumbling and careening up the long slantwise tunnel behind my flashlight's madly bobbing beam, feet tangling in power

cables leading to chambers where screens bled information from space into space, I tripped and fell and surged to my feet again, until brightness shone from around a corner and I found myself plunging headlong into evening light. Snatching up my backpack and gear from where I'd left them at the entrance, I saw the sky above me shimmering — iridescent blues, salmon pinks. Panting hard, I hastily averted my eyes, focusing my attention on flat jungle green, afraid to look into the tall strange chalice of that sky.

In the waning light I forded the flood that thundered away to the falls and made my way upward through the drowned world of jungle twilight, surging finally onto the plateau like a swimmer breaking surface after a long dive. Wandering only a short way through the maze, I shed my gear and radioed in to Garza and the men. Something in my voice must have confirmed their fears, and their words seemed smug, condescending.

Collapsing beneath a log, I do not know whether I slept or not. The air around me thundered and the earth shook, and through it all I heard the ghost people singing.

That morning the hollow labyrinth on the tepui's crown was like a maze of cave tunnels turned inside out, but after several hours of numbed walking I strode free of it. Garza and his men when I joined them were full of horrified tales of apparitions and earth tremors and streams of lightning leaping up from the very stones. They were overjoyed at my return — and our leaving — and our descent from the tepui's top was swift. The weather cooperated, raining only lightly for a few hours, so that by mid-afternoon we had descended the bulk of the tepui's height, and by evening we were on the lower ridge, making camp for the night, looking back at that mysterious height from which we had so recently descended.

The sun had just set when it happened. The earth shook with such violence that we were knocked from our feet, and the forests below us seemed to toss like waves in a storm. The tremors calmed for a moment, and, looking wildly around, I saw it: a great ring of dust about halfway up Caracamuni's height. The tremors gradually stopped, and from where I lay sprawled on the ground, I saw something that to this day I cannot explain or forget.

Caracamuni appeared to be growing taller. As its top continued to rise, though, I saw that it was not growing but separating, top half from bottom half, at that ring of thinning dust. In moments the top half had risen free of the dusty billows, and a space of clear sky intervened between the sundered halves of the ancient mountain.

As I got slowly to my feet, I realized Caracamuni was decoupling from the earth, rising smoothly as a mushroom in the night, drifting away like a ship slipping from harbor, heading toward open sea, open sky. Garza stood beside me, seeing it too, crossing himself and murmuring prayers he probably hadn't said since he was a boy. I grabbed my videocam and framed the scene in my viewfinder, but there it looked like trick photography, cinematic special effect. After a moment I stopped taping its ascent and just watched it with my own eyes.

Caracamuni had risen beyond the highest clouds when the sound hit us in a great wave that drove Garza's Pemon assistants to bury their clenched faces against the bosom of the earth. It was a fearful, prodigiously powerful sound

— but one that I had heard before, more softly. It was the song of thought strengthened by stone a billion billion times.

The sun shone full upon the ascending mountain, now clear of earth's curve, where we lay in darkness below. But the waterfall — the waterfall did not disappear in a long mist to earth. I puzzled over it, until I saw the way the light bent around the mountain, refracting in a great sphere like the shimmer of heatwaves from asphalt, from desert and mirage, from the boundary of a soap bubble. Caracamuni was ascending in a bubble of force, its high waterfall plunging down only to spread out again in a broad swirl along the boundary's edge.

From the spheroid mountain a pale fire like inverted alpenglow began to shine, increasing in intensity until, in a brilliant burst of white light, the mountain disappeared, as silently and completely as a soap bubble bursting in a summer sky.

Only after the tremendous blast of thunder rolled over us, distant and deep, did we hear the silent coda to the song.

Another obscure piece of rainforest real estate had disappeared. The earth science experts interpreted our tale of the ascent of Caracamuni as an "anomalous volcanic eruption" and filed it away for future reference. My short tape of the tepui rising was written off as a hoax. Fash's anthropologists and archeologists canceled their expedition. Those organizations that had granted or loaned Jake funds hassled for a time but eventually wrote off both Jake and his failed expedition under something

called a "forgiveness clause."

Forty-odd aboriginal astronauts and a schizophrenic ethnobotanist as humanity's first personal ambassadors to the universe. I know how crazy that sounds.

Still, in my study I have a desk drawer filled with memories. Jake has been reduced to text. The only traces of him are lines of print and code — police reports, bills, receipts, and notes, all carefully filed away. Also in the drawer are clippings and notes about quartz: fused from silicon and oxygen, the two most common elements to be found in the crust of Earth and Earthlike planets; harder than steel, fashioned into weapons for the past fifty thousand years; beloved by ancient Sumerians and Egyptians, Bedouins and Crusaders, Oriental craftsmen, electronics manufacturers, New Age spiritualists. I read the notes and sometimes wonder about the source of humanity's long romance with that rock.

About mushrooms my resources are much sparser, but amongst them is an item that will never leave me. I found it deep in my backpack after I emptied the pack on returning home: a carefully folded sheet of white paper, upon which can be seen a dusty blue image like the photo-negative of a brain — a spore print.

Whether the print was planted there while I was in the cave or during that long night on the tepui top, and by whom, I do not know. I only know that I cannot see fit to make public its existence — nor can I bring myself to destroy it, any more than I could destroy any of my information on Jake. Information, as he said, is everything.

And I? I go on rushing into nothing. □

A Long Time Ago

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

We think he did a fine job at *Galileo*, and, in fact, it was on the strength of that performance that we picked him to help turn *Aboriginal Science Fiction* into the first successful SF magazine in a decade.

Now, on his behalf, we'd like to give you an opportunity to see some of the best stories he collected a decade ago.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for \$10, plus \$1 postage and handling. If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors:

Harlan Ellison

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Europe, Your Much-Traveled Critic, the Lovecraft Centennial, Answering the Mail, and, Oh, Incidentally, a Few Books

This column comes to you somewhat hurriedly, with our Noble Editor waiting in quiet desperation to put the issue together. Like many American SF folks including our Editor, Himself, I've been jaunting about the globe. Everyone seems to have gone to distant places — I touring the *Imperium Romanum*, beginning of course in *Roma Mater* herself (with a sidetrip to Pompeii, complete with a visit to the famous Room of the Naughty Bits), then through *Raetia*, *Germania Superior*, *Germania Inferior*, maybe a little bit of *Belgica*, and ultimately on to the famous city of *Londonium* in the province of *Britannia* — but we all intersected in The Hague, Holland, for Confiction, the first genuinely international Worldcon. It was the first convention in history where Americans were actually in the minority, there having been a thousand American no-shows, more a matter of a weak dollar than fears of Iraqi terrorism.

Not that we Yanks had any problem communicating. What language do you think that, say, the Swedes and Finns use to communicate with Germans, Poles, Italians, and Czechs? American, of course ... or at least English.

But it does wreak some havoc on magazine schedules. Deadlines, as inexorable as lava, creep upon us, and can be deflected but little. Since the international traveler is severely limited by the weight of luggage, one can't just go dragging off a pile of books to Europe in hopes of finding time to read them. I took a galley of Fred Pohl's *The World at the End of*

Time along, read the bulk of the novel on various planes and trains, sold the galley to a dealer in Holland so I wouldn't have to carry it further (for five pounds; the bottom has fallen completely out of the galley market), and finished reading a completed copy of the book when I got home. Otherwise, many of this column's reviews are not of books that were actually sent to me for review, but things I picked up in Europe and managed to read in odd moments.

But first a few (inevitable) words about H.P. Lovecraft. The other bit of traveling I did, just before leaving for Europe, was to go to Providence, Rhode Island twice, once for the Horror Writers of America awards banquet, and again for Northeast Regional Fantasy Con. ("Camp NECon," for short; it was described by the wife of one of the guests a few years ago as "boys' summer camp for horror writers." There's even a camp T-shirt, with a little bat on it.)

This year I, of all people, was asked to deliver a speech over H.P. Lovecraft's grave. For reasons too complicated to get into here, the cemetery keepers wouldn't let us in, and I delivered my speech elsewhere. During an off-hour in the HWA weekend, I had given the Old Gent another tribute. With a copy of Lovecraft's *Providence* in hand, I paced out the hallowed streets of College Hill. Three weeks later, at NECon, I could assume the role of impromptu tour-guide, because I was the only one who could find the Charles Dexter Ward house or knew where HPL's last residence had been moved to.

This is all building up to something. Have faith. The relevant point is that nobody publishes guidebooks to *Seabury Quinn's Harrisonville, New Jersey* (or wherever it was) or delivers speeches over the grave of Captain S.P. Meek, USA. 1990 was the centennial of Lovecraft's birth,

and had I not been in Europe on the weekend of the 20th of August, I certainly would have been in Providence for yet a third time at the Lovecraft Centennial Conference at Brown University. The Sage of Providence has been honored in numerous ways, not all of which came off successfully. There is no Lovecraft postage stamp. The plaque which was to be put up in Prospect Terrace overlooking the city is at the John Hay Library instead.

But Lovecraft is remembered, in a way that no other genre writer of his generation is. He is quite literally the only pre-John Campbell contributor (of original material, as opposed to the reprints of, say, H.G. Wells) to the science fiction and fantasy magazines who "made it" in a big way: worldwide critical recognition, endless reprints and translations, a growing mountain of critical works, journals, etc., etc. S.T. Joshi, the noted Lovecraft scholar, is working on yet another book for Starmont House, which is basically about the *philosophy* of H.P. Lovecraft, a subject on which Joshi has discoursed before in all seriousness, because there is, seriously, something to talk about. While some of the other writers of the day — Merritt, Burroughs, E.E. Smith — are still read for fun and nostalgia, and Clark Ashton Smith actually shows genuine artistic merit, Lovecraft remains the only one who has ever been seriously accused of being *about* anything.

So he lives on. I wonder how many of the big names of our time will do as well. And to honor Howard Lovecraft on his Happy Hundreth, we have the following:

At the Mountains of Madness

By H.P. Lovecraft

Illustrated by Fernando Duval
Donald M. Grant, Publisher, 1990
95 pp., \$12.00

The first thing you notice about

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this book when you take the shrink-wrap off is the smell. Normally, the only bibliographic items in our field noted for their olfactory qualities are pulp magazines, which molder uniquely; but Grant's *At the Mountains of Madness*, when first exposed to the air, smells like brand-new shoes. The binding is genuine leather, or a damned convincing imitation. It's also the deluxe edition to end all deluxe editions, and at the given price, it had better be. Brazilian artist Duval was so inspired by Lovecraft's Antarctic archaeologist's report that he produced dozens of intricate, semi-abstract color drawings without any plan for publication. They were displayed at Brown University (the Lovecraftian navel of the universe) where they came to Grant's attention, and this book resulted. The artwork is moody, atmospheric, and in many ways the best Lovecraftian illustration since Howard V. Brown's cover for "The Shadow Out of Time" on the June 1936 *Astounding*, although at the same time it will not be to everyone's taste. But illustrating great classics is always problematic: generations of readers have already built up their own ideas of what things should look like. Illustrators tend to be less explicit. One thinks of Barry Moser's elusive illustrations for *Frankenstein*.

The story itself is one of Lovecraft's most elaborate forays into science fiction, very far removed from the sort of First-Person-Delirious narrative his detractors associate with him: a spare, impersonal report of an expedition into the heart of the (then unknown) Antarctic, where the explorers find, first, a vast, pre-human city, then frozen (but quite animate) vast pre-humans which look vaguely like gigantic green peppers with wings. The first third or so is enormously powerful, presenting one of the most memorable vistas in all of SF. The middle section largely consists of the characters deciphering carvings and denying the obvious. (I used to have trouble with that, wondering how so much could be learned so quickly from wall reliefs which were, after all, carved millions of years ago by a totally alien culture. Then, having recently seen the enormous Assyrian wall reliefs in the British Museum, I find myself beginning to understand.) I've always been a touch impatient with the characters'

refusal to believe, in the face of overwhelming evidence, that the alien specimens are indeed alive. After all, the city itself is the big shock. Once that is established as a given, and the specimens are found in perfect condition, and then a camp is destroyed, the men dissected, and the specimens disappear, leaving scads of distinct footprints, well...

The problem was that Lovecraft was still using supernatural story techniques on science fiction, and he wasn't always successful. The result is a long, vivid lecture tour, like a static, if awesome, dream, and it says "boo!" at the end. It was not well received by *Astounding*'s readers in 1936, but it displays an intensity of



vision nothing else of the period had, which is why *At the Mountains of Madness*, virtually alone from that period, has survived.

Is this edition worth it? You'll have to decide. The production values are high enough to justify the price, certainly.

Rating:

The World at the End of Time

By Frederik Pohl
Del Rey Books, 1990
393 pages, \$17.95

I can imagine this appearing fifty years ago in that unique and short-lived pulp, *Smarmy Science Novels*... Like Pohl's recent *Heechee* books and *Homegoing*, *The World at the End of Time* has all the hyper-colossal scope of a 1935 *Astounding* "Thought

Variant": sentient energy masses who fling stars and planets to the ends of the cosmos without ever suspecting the existence of human life, a hero who has undergone suspended animation so often he is the oldest human being alive and the only one who can remember Old Earth as he is exiled billions of years into an unimaginable future which may well stretch beyond the death of the universe, and so on. One thinks of Don A. Stuart, and of Ross Rocklynne's "Darkness" series, but with a difference.

Pohl is at heart a satirist, for all his recent books have been re-examinations of the super-science fiction of his youth. His approach does not evoke so much a sense of wonder as a smirk. He can't quite take all this seriously. In the present novel, he seems to be, uncomfortably, talking down to his reader as if (particularly in the early sections) this were a condescending juvenile. But the little kid character grows up and becomes a real adult with real sexual relationships, real griefs, real complexities. Nobody in 1935's *Astounding* found himself awakened from the sleep of millennia because the folk of the future wanted his sperm.

It's an interesting, but not quite successful mix, rich in invention; something you'll keep reading but hardly be moved by, neither wondrous nor completely absurd, as if the final sections of, say, *Tau Zero* or *Childhood's End* had been given a wisecass tone.

Rating:

Three British Novellas (not necessarily by British writers):

Century/Legend has started a line of novellas, less-than-book-length-books, rather like the Hutchinson Novellas series, save that all of the titles are explicitly science fiction or fantasy. One of the contributors tells me that Century tied up the rights pretty tightly, so you may expect to see American editions of these, but no reprints in, say, *Asimov's* in six months.

I bought three at the Worlcon: *Needling Ghosts* by Ramsey Campbell (80 pp., £8.99 pence), *Kalimantan* by Lucius Shepard (160 pp., £8.99), and *Black Cocktail* by Jonathan Carroll (76 pp., £8.99). There is also a Greg Bear volume, *Heads*, which I don't

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have.

I had the highest hopes for the Carroll, since he has shown himself to be such a brilliant writer in the past, and *Black Cocktail* certainly begins promisingly, as a grown man is visited by a 15-year-old genius hoodlum he knew in high school — who is still 15. It's a typical, eerie Carroll situation, but before there's much development, we have a very contrived explanation and an aborted ending. Alas, it reads less like a novella than the husk of a very good novel that died.

Needing Ghosts is not a book to read when you're tired. I kept dozing off over it on the plane, and I also found myself reading passages again



and again looking for little cues that seemed to be missing. Probably this one would work better as a reading, with the author's voice forcing you along at a steady pace. The prose quite suits the nightmarish events of the story (the really worst day of a popular author's life) and presents numerous vivid, surreal images, but it also has the quality of a vaseline-smearred lens. It's subtle, rewarding, but difficult.

I liked the Shepard best. I recall him mentioning at some convention that he intended to go to Borneo and "hang out." Well, I guess he did, and we are enriched by the result. *Kalimantan* is a vivid, supernatural *Heart of Darkness* about a sleazy American who vanishes into the jungles of Borneo and manages (with the help of mind-altering drugs) to awaken the ancient, mythic powers of the place. It's full of wonderful im-

agery and subtle touches of characterization.

Ratings:

Black Cocktail:

★☆

Needing Ghosts:

★☆☆

Kalimantan:

★☆☆☆☆

And an Irish novella:

The Garden of Echoes

By Mervyn Wall

Fingal Books (P.O. Box 1430, Finglas, Dublin 11, Ireland), 1988
109 pp. £3.95 (Irish)

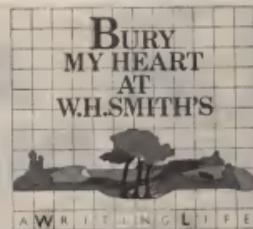
Mervyn Wall, as I've often said at length, is arguably the best living fantasy writer, although one of the least known. His *The Unfortunate Fursey* and *The Return of Fursey* (1946, 1947, collected as *The Complete Fursey*, Wolfhound Press, 1985) are wonderful, deeply moving tragi-comedies about a medieval Irish lay brother who accidentally becomes a sorcerer and finds himself at odds with Church and State and sometimes befriended by Satan. They are the only fantasies known to me which are fully as good as T.H. White at his best, and for the same reasons; yet they have never been reprinted in American paperback as fantasy, for all they are better than anything any of the contemporary publishers have to offer. At times I suspect that is precisely *why*. But it's got more to do with the strategy of building up an audience through several books. Timid genre editors don't buy books, but careers. They want young writers — and I've even heard one admit he/she wasn't interested in any new authors over about 40 — whose careers can be channelled into commercially predictable lines. An older writer (Wall is in his early 80s) who isn't likely to produce much more doesn't have a chance, regardless of merit.

The Garden of Echoes was written about 30 years ago, first published in *The Journal of Irish Literature* in 1982 (circulation 500), and is now published as a book. It came to my attention because the author sent me a copy.

It's a fable, not quite a children's book — or, really, a book about childhood for adults — which might be described as a bedtime story by Ambrose Bierce at his blackest. The

plot concerns two children who venture through a magic bookcase into fantasy land, pursued by a pedantic teenaged student (their babysitter) who is determined to put an end to imagination and (incidentally) shoot Santa Claus. The satire isn't as effective as that in the *Fursey* books. It's too shrill. The laughter is gone and the bitterness overwhelms. One thinks of Mark Twain's tirades against "the damned human race." But such shrillness defeats satire, since it warns us off. The humor of the *Fursey* books seduces first, then draws us in to the books' dark core.

Nevertheless, *The Garden of Echoes* is still of considerable interest.



BRIAN
ALDISS



I hope some American dealer will import it. And I will always love that line about the king whose castle is infested with busybody rats. He can't get rid of them, you see. "They're the government."

Rating: ★☆☆☆☆

Noted:

Bury My Heart at W.H. Smith's: A Writing Life
By Brian Aldiss
Hodder & Stoughton, 1990
221 pp., £13.95

Look for this one from the importers. I'm not sure Aldiss is popular enough here for such a volume to make it on the American market — first of all, the title would have to be translated into the American as *Bury My Heart at B. Dalton's* — which is a great shame, because it is a charming

memoir of Aldiss's life and career and would certainly be appreciated by anyone who enjoyed the recent Kerosina Press Aldiss volumes, for instance.

It's not quite an autobiography, and is, like Lord Dunsany's three volumes starting with *Patches of Sunlight*, reticent on personal matters, but rich with anecdotes, observations, wit, and some wisdom. Certainly any would-be writer should read it, because it contains much good sense, as should any would-be Aldiss scholar, because he often goes into detail about how certain works were created.

Recommended.

Rating: ★★☆☆☆

Answering the Mail

This column gets fan mail, more so than anything else I write. I can publish a story in *Fear*, reach 50,000 readers, and not hear a peep, but here, our Noble Editor finds himself shoveling mail my way.

Much of it is favorable, some not.

Also, several people have asked for the address of the admirable *Crypt of Cthulhu* magazine. It is: Robert M. Price, 216 Fernwood Ave., Upper Montclair, NJ 07043. \$4.50 a copy.

And I have a really strange letter from Mr. (signature illegible), who says: "Stranger in a Strange Land" was originally published under the name *The Man from Mars*. I had a copy, hardcover, for years. When I first bought *Stranger*, it seemed familiar

and it didn't take me too long to wander to my bookshelf and find out why."

I can only suspect this is a leak from an alternate time-line. In our universe *The Man from Mars* was Heinlein's working title, but the book was never published except as *Stranger* in 1961. There was no serialization. Is it possible some advance galley got out with the working title on them? Otherwise Mr. Signature Illegible once owned a Heinlein book unknown to Heinlein scholarship, bibliographers, book dealers, and, by all indications, Heinlein himself. If he could produce it now, that would be very interesting. And fabulously valuable. □

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I-25

Alternate Worlds

Slow Dancing Through Time

By Gardner Dozois, with Jack Dann, Michael Swanwick, Susan Casper, and Jack C. Haldeman II
 Ursus Imprints, 1990
 273 pp., \$22.00

Gardner Dozois, the editor of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, is



also a fine writer who is unfortunately under-appreciated because of his small output, particularly since becoming a magazine editor. This collection of stories written in collaboration with four other notable writers should bring him back to people's attention. They range from science fiction to fan-

tasy to horror, from silly humor to terrifying suspense.

The most harrowing, and probably the most controversial, story is "Down Among the Dead Men," written with Jack Dann, which tells of a vampire among the inmates of a Nazi concentration camp. Its final image is seared into my memory. "Playing the Game," also written with Dann, is a short story whose subtle, existential horror sneaks up on the reader. "Executive Clemency," written with Jack C. Haldeman II, is a moving, convincing, and original post-holocaust story. "The Gods of Mars," written with Dann and Michael Swanwick, is a thought-provoking look at consensus reality told through the eyes of the first manned mission to Mars, and will be particularly enjoyable for those who remember fondly the Barsoom novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs.

Those four stories are the best, but that's not to take anything away from the rest: all are very good to excellent. The light fantasies, with the exception of the delightfully silly "Golden Apples of the Sun" (with Dann and Swanwick), are less impressive than the rest, but they do provide a valuable break from the disturbing atmosphere of most of the contents. Dozois provides afterwords to all the stories, and Dann, Swanwick, Haldeman, and Susan Casper contribute essays, which provide a fascinating look at the creative and collaborative process.

Slow Dancing Through Time is an important and often brilliant collection. Don't miss it.

Rating: **★★★★+**

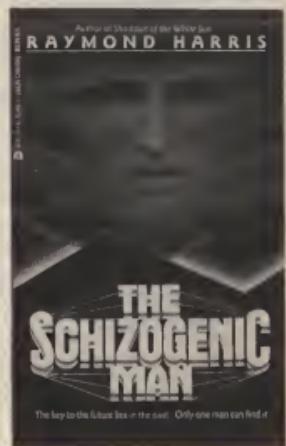
The Schizogenic Man

By Raymond Harris
 Ace, 1990
 240 pp., \$3.95

Raymond Harris's new novel (set in the same future history as his

Shadows of the White Sun, but much earlier) is an odd, disturbing tale of a grim future and alternate realities, and includes fascinating passages of historical fiction.

John Heron is a resident of New City — its exact location is not clear, but it seems to be somewhere in the eastern part of North America — in a future



set after an apparent world war. In New City, jobs, except for those in the professions, are doled out according to a lottery; when Heron is offered a temporary way out of the lottery by participating in an experiment, he takes it gladly. The experiment involves computerized role-playing, and Heron finds himself with Cleopatra in Alexandria shortly before its fall to Octavius. Somehow, though, the changes he makes in this historical simulation seem to thrust him into one alternate world after another, each subtly different, and each slightly worse than the last.

New City is constructed in imaginative detail. Life there seems hard and depressing to us, and the fact that it's better than the rest of this postwar world is extremely telling. Admittedly, there's a certain appeal to the ideology the lottery process is derived from: that no one should be stuck permanently in one slot due to lucky or unlucky accidents. Though these passages are well-written and believable, the scenes set in Alexandria are even better, more vivid and human.

Heron is an appealing main character. The other inhabitants of New City



change with each world he arrives in, but they remain credible. The historical characters in Alexandria are interesting, but less approachable, as they are more alien.

The book's ending is confusing and not well explained. Part of the problem is that in a book containing many scenes occurring in computer simulation, the reader has difficulty knowing whether a particular scene is "real" or not. The book contains some fascinating speculation, though, and its many virtues make it well worth reading.

Rating:

20/20 Vision

By Pamela West
Del Rey, 1990
228 pp., \$3.95

Pamela West has combined the police procedural mystery novel with time travel in her fascinating, but confusing, book, *20/20 Vision*. Nearly any time travel story can be filled with paradoxes and connections that make your head spin, but this one carries that to new, and in some cases un-

necessary, heights. If you can get past your bewilderment, though, you'll find an excellent mystery combined with fine near-future extrapolation.

The plot takes place in three different times: 2040, 2020, and 1995. Police Officer E. E. Lacoste is investigating old unsolved cases when she comes across one that may be the perfect crime, and thus eligible for some sort of award. To test it, a sort of time travel is used to induce the investigating officer, and prime suspect, of the 1995 murder, Maxwell Caine, to demonstrate his guilt, in the year 2020. Instead, Max replays the murder through a simulation program developed by the younger Lacoste, and gradually gets closer to solving it, with the simulation itself seemingly having a real effect on the past.

Even that confusing explanation is oversimplified, and the book can become difficult to follow. It could have been clarified by eliminating the section taking place in 2040, which seems unnecessary except for a minor plot device used to induce the 2020 Max to pick up this long-dead case again. West might have been better advised to work around that; the explanation given doesn't make much sense anyway.

**What would
you do if
four hours
of your life
were suddenly
missing?**



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All these violations of causality need to be explained, of course, or at least hand-waved away. The author has found the right approach to such a serious contradiction of current physics: make up your own. In this case, we are presented with a unified field theory that has replaced relativity and allows one to violate causality, among other things. Unfortunately, the long explanations of the doubletalk physics are bewildering and tiresome. I gave up trying to understand after the first couple of times and let my eyes glaze over when I got



to those passages.

The time travel/police procedural part is lots of fun, as Max reruns the past over and over, trying not just to solve the murder, but to save the victim. The final solution grows out of what we already know, but is not predictable.

The near future is well extrapolated — assuming current theories about the environment hold — although I could have done without all the terms West throws around without explanation, particularly in that troublesome 2040 section. A complex computer adventure game called Wormwood plays some sort of crucial role, both in permitting the simulation and in allowing it to have an actual effect on the past. The explanation of this role seems to lie somewhere in the doubletalk physics; perhaps it will be clearer to others than it was to me.

20/20 Vision is bizarre and frustrating, but compelling. Don't try to figure out everything that happens; ignore the confusing parts and enjoy the murder mystery.

Rating:



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The Interior Life
By Katherine Blake
Baen, 1990
313 pp., \$3.95

Katherine Blake's first novel, *The Interior Life*, is an engaging story of a bored, frustrated housewife and her relationship with the women of an imaginary, medievalish world. One could argue whether it's really a fantasy, though there is at least one hint that the imaginary world has some existence outside of the protagonist's



head. Though I enjoyed the book, I was troubled by its relentlessly retrogressive depiction of woman's role.

As the story opens, Sue finds herself bored and unhappy now that both of her children are in school. Her husband Fred is trying to get an important promotion and needs her help. She also must fend off the advances of the man who can give Fred the promotion. Her fantasy world begins as an escape, but soon spills over into reality as the characters advise her how to change her life. In that world, we read the story of Lady Amalia's quest to defeat the evil sorcerer Imber, who is gradually converting the land into uninhabitable Darklands. The author alternates between Sue's story and that of Amalia and her châtelaine, Marianella. The switching between typefaces to indicate which story is being told takes some getting used to, but it works, though I balked a bit when a third

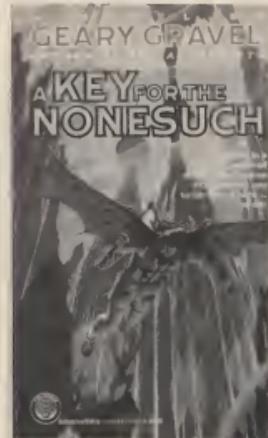
typeface was introduced late in the book.

In the early part of the novel, before Amalia sets off on her quest, I found the "mundane" sections much more interesting than the fantasy ones, though later that distribution of interest was reversed. As Amalia says, Sue is something of a wimp; the forays of the fantasy characters into our world to advise her are witty and enjoyable. Most of the characters are credible, though Chris Bingley, the superior of Fred's who pursues Sue, acts incomprehensibly and inconsistently. Sue receives a lot of help from two teenage friends; I don't know where these cheerful, helpful teenagers come from, but I wish I could meet some.

The plot of the fantasy is fine, if nothing particularly original in the way of quests; the setting is beautifully created, and the Darklands are chillingly alien. The "mainstream" section, however, leaves something to be desired. Though it seized my interest originally, as I continued reading I was increasingly disturbed by the reactionary subtext.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with being a housewife and mother, of course, but it is bothersome that everything Sue does to make her life more interesting is intended to fur-

ther either her children's education or her husband's career — in other words, "safe" outside interests, nothing that hints she's an independent person. (She does enroll in a medieval history course near the end of the book, but it's barely touched on.) We are witness to her transformation into the Perfect Corporate Wife, who can redecorate the house and throw wonderful dinner parties for her husband's business associates, sew her own clothes and bake her own bread to save money, not to mention be active in the PTA and have lots of



Would you
dare
find out
what
happened?



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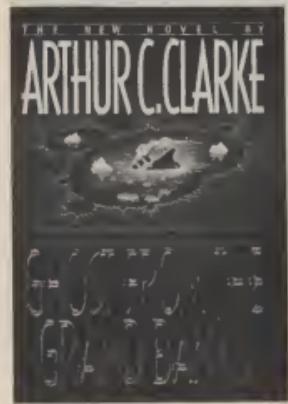
sex with her husband. The book seems to imply that becoming the Perfect Corporate Wife is as adventurous and worthy a goal as Amalia's.

The way we know that Sue is cheerful and her marriage is going well is that she and Fred have great sex; in fact, when Sue's increasing outside interests are brought up by one of her husband's friends, Fred's response is not to say that the pursuits make Sue happier, but to talk about how wonderful in bed she's become. This may be realistic, but in the context of the rest of the book it's unfortunate. Then there's teenage Kelly, a recent high-school graduate in a dilemma because the boy she planned to marry has dumped her and she has no job. All of Sue's efforts are expended to find her a husband, not to do anything to help Kelly educate or support herself. (The husband she does find her is about to enter a Ph.D. program; pray, what are they to live on?) The final blow comes at the end of the fantasy

story, when Amalia yields the throne she's been awarded in favor of the man who screwed everything up in the first place.

Certainly this sort of philosophical objection doesn't invalidate a work of entertainment, and the book is enjoyable in many ways and well-written. But the troublesome attitude is so pervasive, and so central to the plot, that it can't help but make the novel less believable and substantially less fun to read. It's worth reading in particular for the scenes in the Darklands, if you can keep from throwing it against the wall.

Rating: **☆☆☆**



Tor SF Double No. 25:

Fugue State

By John M. Ford
and

The Death of Doctor Island

By Gene Wolfe
Tor, 1990
183 pp., \$3.50

Tor's latest double brings together two science-fictional tales about mind, perception, and memory.

John M. Ford's *Fugue State* is exciting, fun, and ultimately baffling. The plot would be impossible to summarize, but it involves several alternate versions of the same time and place. I think I grasp what's going on in the outer, circular story: a kind of deliberately induced amnesia (fugue) which keeps the U.S. from remembering the Soviet Union (and, presumably, vice versa), but I don't see how the various alternate world stories fit in.

They are very well done — I particularly like the world controlled by the Wellian World Air League and the version where New York is a medieval kingdom — but I simply can't figure out how they all fit together, what's going on, and what the author is saying. I read it carefully, twice, and I'm still puzzled. Maybe I'm not smart enough to read Ford's work.

The Death of Doctor Island, by Gene Wolfe, is a Nebula-winning classic about a frightening future psychiatric automaton and the people it "treats." The story is alternately moving and horrifying, with a powerful ending. And, of course, since it's Gene Wolfe, it's brilliantly written. If you've never read it, seek it out.

Rating: **☆☆☆+**

A Key for the Nonesuch

By Geary Gravel
Del Rey, 1990
229 pp., \$3.95

Anyone who's ever wondered what lies beyond the locked doors of the executive washroom will enjoy *A Key for the Nonesuch*, Geary Gravel's delightful new SF adventure story. As the front cover alerts you, it is the first of a series and as such has an open ending; it's no cliffhanger, but the larger story hasn't been resolved.

Gravel takes the rather silly cliché of a character falling into an alternate world and makes it more interesting by the method he uses: Howard Bell, illicitly using the key to the executive washroom of a new building, accidentally activates its mysterious powers and finds himself in an alien world. It turns out that a group of mysterious, powerful aliens called the Keyholders has collected intelligent races from throughout the galaxy and divided them into teams which battle from world to world in an endless game. The Keys are used by the Keyholders to travel among the worlds; how a Key got onto a janitor's belt in Boston will presumably be explained eventually.

There's nothing much new in this, though some of the details are striking, but it is written with a sharp wit which saves it from being generic. The characters are a lot of fun, and the alien races intriguing. The plot, appropriately enough, feels a bit like a role-playing game, as the characters solve one hazard after another, but it's

smoothly written and enjoyable enough that you go along for the ride. I'll look forward to the next installment.

Rating: **☆☆☆+**

The Ghost from the Grand Banks

By Arthur C. Clarke
Bantam/Spectra, 1990
288 pp., \$19.95

The Ghost from the Grand Banks is an extraordinarily disappointing novel from a member of the SF pantheon. This is not a question of greater expectations from Arthur C. Clarke than from lesser authors; Clarke seems to have written the novel in his



sleep. There's no interest, no tension, and no way I would have finished it if I weren't reviewing it.

The novel tells the stories of several individuals involved in plans to raise the *Titanic* in 2012, the centennial of its sinking. Most of the tale deals with dull maneuverings and planning; by the time they get to raising the ship, ho-hum, who cares? And these long-awaited underwater adventure scenes aren't suspenseful in the least.

The characters are very thin, including that old non-favorite, the obnoxious child prodigy. There's also a bunch of material about the Mandelbrot set (set of numbers important to fractal mathematics) which turns out to have nothing at all to do with the story; Clarke just thinks it's cool and wants to explain it to us (and does, in a chapter's worth of lecture). It is cool, but it doesn't belong in this book. The Mandelbrot-induced psychosis he depicts is laughable.

We are also treated to near-future extrapolation that is flabbergastingly poor coming from someone with Clarke's record. I seriously doubt that by the mid-1990s (five years from now!) people will be so revolted by tobacco that they will refuse to watch movies that show people smoking. And even in 17 years, I can't imagine anyone referring to the Beatles — if they've heard of them — as "classical music," as one character does.

This future is unconvincing, to say the least. One of the major historical events in the novel's set-up was the averting of disaster in 1999, when the world financial system would have collapsed due to the inability of computers to handle a change in the century. This problem is vastly overstated; while many programs will have difficulty, many others record dates as an integer number of days from a baseline date, so it will hardly be a worldwide disaster. It's also completely unbelievable that one program could work on every computer system in the world. Clarke should have talked to some more computer experts.

Worst of all, Clarke makes errors of technique that shouldn't be tolerated in a first novel. Clumsy exposition through dialogue: "You've heard of the Peltier Effect?" "Of course.... [E]very domestic icebox has depended on it since 2001, when the environmental treaties banned fluorocarbons." Horrible cliché: says one character (in the year 2012), "Oh, back in the barbarous twentieth century many people would have agreed with you." Falling out of the future viewpoint into our own: "Rupert Parkinson... clicked shut the miracle of electronic intelligence which was now as casually accepted as the telephone had been a lifetime earlier."

The Ghost from the Grand Banks is depressingly terrible. It is recommended only for Clarke completists or *Titanic* fanatics.

Rating: **★+**

Tigana

By Guy Gavriel Kay
Roc, 1990
250 pp., \$21.95

Guy Gavriel Kay's *Tigana* is an epic fantasy on the grand scale, which is, unusually enough these days, complete in one volume. For that alone he would deserve praise; fortunately, From the Bookshelf

that's the least of the book's virtues. While it doesn't break any new ground, it is a beautifully executed and absorbing tale of exile, love, and loyalty. Kay creates a living world that is familiar and yet not clichéd and populates it with a large cast of characters who have real personalities.

The peninsula of the Palm, a collection of squabbling dukedoms, is under foreign occupation by two different powers. The main characters are working toward uniting the Palm and defeating the occupying forces; in particular, they are committed to reversing the wrong done to the province of Tigana, whose memory and very name have been magically erased from the minds of all not born there. The book takes the characters from the beginning of their fight to the climactic battle for the Palm.

The characters are believable and three-dimensional. Even the hero, while almost too good to be true, has depth and is more than an archetypal good guy. Kay manages to induce the reader to be sympathetic to one of the two main villains while still hating what he has done to Tigana and its people. The other villain is not at all sympathetic, but Kay manages to

make him credible by showing how he justifies his own actions.

The writing, despite occasional flaws, flows smoothly and beautifully. Kay moves among many different points of view, even sometimes depicting the same scene from the viewpoint of two different characters. This sort of movement is very difficult to execute, and Kay does it well. The world, while not unfamiliar, is well constructed with lots of delightful touches; the theology of the Palm is particularly interesting. The sweeping plot comes together brilliantly.

Tigana is a wonderful place to lose yourself for a weekend. Anyone who enjoys fantasy with touches of myth shouldn't miss it.

Rating: **★★★★★**

Golden Fleece
By Robert J. Sawyer
Questar, 1990
250 pp., \$4.95

Golden Fleece is an unusual book. Robert J. Sawyer's first novel is told from the viewpoint of the computer controlling a colony starship. This device, while not wholly successful, is intriguing, and the plot is exciting, although the final explanation is not credible.

Something is very wrong aboard the starship Argo. As the novel opens, we witness the artificial intelligence JASON murdering a crewmember who has apparently run across some inconvenient information — inconvenient to JASON, that is. This naturally evokes in the reader memories of HAL 9000, and the obvious conclusion is that JASON is insane. Unfortunately for the humans aboard, the explanation is far more horrible. During the course of the novel, we watch, from JASON's viewpoint, as crewman Aaron Rossman investigates the death and gradually approaches the frightening truth.

The plot is suspenseful as we try to figure out how, or if, JASON will be found out and defeated. However, the cause of the computer's odd behavior, the catalyst of the entire plot, is completely unconvincing. The ending of the main plot fails because Sawyer has not led up to it or set it up in any way, making it seem tacked on. There's an oddly old-fashioned *Frankenstein* feel to the book. A subplot about communications from aliens — which includes the chilling

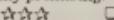


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epilogue — is not integrated with the main plot, and we certainly didn't need chapters of discussion of the process of decoding the messages. This subplot, which is important to the story's outcome, should have been better interwoven, and the exposition cut drastically.

In general, JASON's narrative is well executed, although sometimes Sawyer uses jargon without explaining it until later, which is distracting. The most serious problem is that the computer has secrets which it must withhold from the readers as well as the characters in order to maintain suspense; as a result, JASON sometimes dances around information it would think about if no readers were eavesdropping. Sawyer characterizes JASON well, though this secret-keeping interferes to some extent. Aaron is a satisfactory character, although JASON's inability to get inside people's heads, except for a sequence in which he reads Aaron's memories, handicaps the reader in the same way. The other crewmembers are barely characterized, so their problems don't mean much to us. The characters are also, as so often in SF novels recently, too familiar with late Twentieth Century pop culture.

Golden Fleece is often exciting, but it never involves you emotionally with its characters. This first novel is flawed, but certainly promising.

Rating: 

Our Next Issue

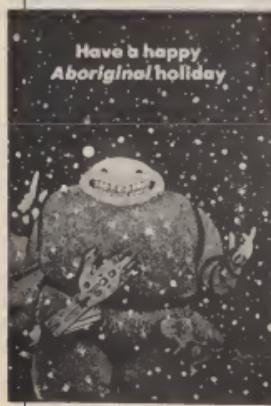
The next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* (March-April 1991) will feature David Brin with an essay on the "Dangers of First Contact" with an alien race. Terry McGarry, who won the Boomerang Award for Best Poem in 1989, will have her first story for *Aboriginal* called "For Fear of Little Men," with wonderful art by Patricia Davis. We'll also have a powerful tale of thwarted vengeance by Joyce Jensen, called "To Whom Shall I Tell my Sorrow?" Pat Morrissey does the illustrating honors. *Aboriginal* No. 26 will also feature "The Madman and the Cubist" by Robert A. Metzger with illustrations by Larry Blamire; MisFITS by Mike Byers, illustrated by Bob Eggleton; "Only a Game" by Rick Shelly, illustrated by Lori Deitrick; and "Nectar" by *Aboriginal* regular Ann K. Schwader with more wonderful art by Courtney Skinner. Picking the cover is not going to be an easy task. The issue will also have our regular book reviews and feature columns. After that will be the special May-June "Interzone" issue of *Aboriginal* which will see print on two continents and contain stories by Harlan Ellison, Lawrence Watt-Evans, Frederik Pohl, Lois Tilton, Wil McCarthy, and Mark Clarkson and Gary Mitchell who combined their talents on an amusing tale of miscommunication.

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Cat Lovers?

If you asked me to characterize science fiction fans and professionals, I'd say they are more intelligent than average and prone to daydreams. But a woman I know claims they are also



Patricia Anthony

more likely to be cat lovers than dog lovers and to prefer tea to coffee. She bases this unscientific opinion on experience, such as attending a convention where the popular coffee shop near the hotel ran out of its large stock of tea when the SFers descended. I have not determined if this issue's contributors fit the tea-drinking, cat-loving profile, but here they are.

Patricia Anthony says "The Holes Where Children Lie," about post-holocaust guilt, is her response to anger at her kids. It follows in the "upchuck all your anger and look at it" pattern of her *Aboriginal* story "Bluebonnets" (July-August 1989), which dealt with her feelings about her mother.

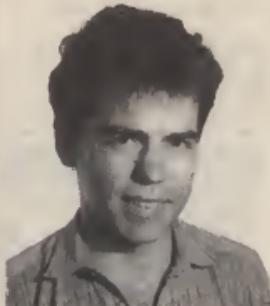
She also claims "Holes" is only the

second most depressing story she's written. The most depressing was called "The Boy Who Had Been Edgar Cayce." She says when she read that one at a writers' meeting, she looked up and "everyone was glaring at me. They were pissed off."

Look for more of Anthony's work in *Pulphouse* and the Bantam anthology *Full Spectrum III*. This is her ninth short story for *Aboriginal*.

"The Holes Where Children Lie" is illustrated by Lori Deitrick, who just moved to Tennessee with her husband, artist David Deitrick. They have a house with a downstairs studio and a shop where David can work on designs in wood and plastic.

Two more family artists just made their debut. Sons Connor, age 11, and Sean, age 9, did acrylic paintings of superheroes, and



John Moore

they were displayed at LibertyCon. David says one son described his work as "so good, it hurts." Of course, neither piece was for sale, and both are now hanging in the Deitrick family studio.

John Moore, who brought us "Sight Unseen" (Oct.-Nov. 1986) and "Trackdown" (February-March 1987), is back in our sights with "Hell on Earth." It's a tale of what can happen when the ultimate life-saving technology meets the medieval mindset.

Between "Trackdown" and "Hell on Earth," Moore got his degree in chemical engineering. He also totalled that Fiero that he liked to drive very fast on deserted country roads. He bought another.

Moore's short stories are appearing in *New Destinies*, *Starshore*, *Marion Zimmer*

Bradley's Fantasy Magazine, *Beyond*, and *Figment*.

"Hell on Earth" is illustrated by David Deitrick.



David Deitrick

story written and illustrated by the same person. "The Honeymoon" by Sandra Paradise is a creepy portrayal of a high-tech criminal and his victim/accomplice.

Paradise says she has drawn, painted, and written all her life. She began exhibiting her work at conventions three years ago and sold her first art work then. She worked as a decorative artist until she was laid off one Thanksgiving. "After a few shocked months of unemployment," she came up with "The Honeymoon."

Paradise has also written and illustrated *Fidelity*, a fairy tale for grown-ups, and a short story about a monk who tends the last garden on Earth. She has two children and enjoys "shopping for weird things for my house."

"The Transformative Ethic" by Doug



Sandra Paradise

Franklin probes the limits of the "adapt-or-die" rule of terrestrial life.

Franklin lives in Alaska with his wife Joyce Mayer and a baby daughter. He works weeks at a time for a mining company "pillaging" the arctic for base metals. "The Transformative Ethic" is his



Doug Franklin

first short story sale. His inventory includes a novel, *Torch Song*, another short story, and a computer game.

Franklin recently climbed Mt. Deadlock, located "way above the Arctic Circle," and says he likes cross-country skiing and "building SF models with circuitry and pretty lights."

David Cherry illustrated "The Transformative Ethic." Cherry was a practicing attorney for about eight years before he switched to art, and says he likes it "a heck of a lot more than going out and arguing with people every day."

He says he was fortunate to have his sister, C.J. Cherryh, as his Latin and ancient history teacher in high school. They share a love for the classical period. He got his start as a professional artist illustrating his sister's novel *Ealdweom*. He now splits his time between covers and fine art.

Cherry is also president of the Association of Science Fiction and Fantasy Artists. He says he and a large group of artists including Aborigines Pat Morrissey, Bob Eggleton, Cari Lundgren, and Lucy Synk have work appearing in the exhibit



David Cherry

"Dreams Awake: The Art of Fantasy" at the Park Avenue Atrium in New York City through November 16, 1990.

In "Singing the Mountain to the Stars" by Howard V. Hendrix, a primitive society's spiritual life revolves around some pretty heady mushrooms. The rich technical details of "Singing" bring to mind "Doctor Doom Conducting," Hendrix's first story for *Aboriginal* (Sept.-Oct. 1987). He's also the author of "The Last Impression of Linda Vista" (May-June 1988).

Hendrix teaches writing at the college level and has written several novels. The first short story he sold won first place in the Writers of the Future contest and was



Howard V. Hendrix

published in *Writers of the Future Volume II*. Peter Lang Publishing brought out Hendrix's scholarly book *The Ecstasy of Catastrophe: A Study of the Apocalyptic Narrative from Langland to Milton* in July 1990, and The Eotu Group published a



Howard V. Hendrix

collection of his "more experimental" SF stories entitled *Testing, Testing, 1, 2, 3*, also in July 1990. He writes full time and lives in California.

"Singing the Mountain to the Stars" is illustrated by Wendy Snow-Lang. She says she's been "chained to the drafting table lately." She's working on a mega-project — writing and illustrating her own four-issue comic book series for FantaCo. It's called "Night's Children," and it features the vampire characters she has written five stories about so far.

Her husband, artist Charles Lang, has been doing covers for the Robert R. McCammon book *They Thirst* and for *Gaultier* magazine.

"Appliance" by Bruce Bethke is a



Bruce Bethke

George Jetson fantasy of intelligent appliances — with a twist. We're glad to get it. Bethke says he hasn't had time to write any more short stories since he became treasurer of the Science Fiction Writers of America. That responsibility includes absorbing such shocks as the bar bill for a SFWA editor-author reception at a New York City hotel.

When I spoke to him, Bethke was overdue on a second draft of a novel he sold to Baen. He says he's under contract to develop a shared-world anthology based on Keith Laumer's "Bolo" stories. Bethke's previous Aboriginal stories were "It Came From the Slushpile" (July-August 1987) and "First Full Contact" (Jan.-Feb. 1990).

"Appliance" is illustrated by Robert J. Pasternak. When I spoke to Pasternak he was moving out of one studio into another and preparing to go off to an Edmonton convention as guest artist.

Latest he's been working on a photo exhibit and reflecting on ten years as an artist. (He began serious painting at age 16.) Pasternak's work is included in an exhibit of Manitoba artists that's traveling to the Ukraine as part of an artistic exchange. □



Robert Pasternak

Human Beings: Whence Did They Come?

This is a tricky question — very tricky. Ask an anthropologist, someone who reads the past in fossilized bones and flint chips, and he or she will tell you things like *Australopithecus* showed up on the African savannah several million years ago, and from this evolved into *Homo erectus*, a very successful creature of perhaps one million years ago who spread out across Asia and Europe to spawn such individuals as the famous Java and Peking humans. As time passed, they evolved into *Homo sapiens sapiens* (that's us), and they continued evolving, developing some slight regional differences, things that make Asians look like Asians, Africans look like Africans, and Europeans look like Europeans.

Have I forgotten anyone? Yes. I've forgotten the caveman who most often comes to mind when one thinks about our ancestors — that brutish, hairy fellow, with a sloping forehead, bony ridges above the eyes, bowed legs, and a propensity for swinging clubs and dragging not-so-willing women back to his cave — Neandertal (this is the correct spelling). The facts are actually somewhat different — Neandertals had brains as large as, or even larger than, yours, and were sophisticated enough to bury their dead, and bury them with tools and flowers, things that they might need in an afterlife. They were strong and smart. But Neandertals were a dead end. They vanished. Starting around 100,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens*, a rather scrawny, thin-skinned animal, with a brain no larger than theirs, managed to push them right off the planet.

So where did these mighty conquerors come from?

Anthropologists will tell you that they were sharing the landscape

with Neandertals all along, that they evolved with Neandertals throughout Asia and Europe, both spawned from the basic *Homo erectus* model, and that *Homo sapiens* eventually simply pushed Neandertals out. That is the accepted view — the one that fills many textbooks.

That's what an anthropologist would probably tell you.

And perfectly reasonable based on the available facts.

But there are always new facts rearing their ugly little heads.

Controversy.

Let's shift gears for a moment. Instead of thinking about fossilized bones, let's think about DNA — a very special type of DNA. The DNA in you and me, the DNA that fills the nucleus of our cells, is a thing of mindboggling complexity, something that contains 100,000 genes, each of which is a messenger, describing the body that it finds itself in — the color of the hair, the cleft in the chin, the folds in the ear, the webbing between the toes — all of it — everything that you are. There is currently a project underway, the human genome project, which is going to map out those genes, something that's projected to take 15 years and three billion dollars — but we aren't going to need that, not for this discussion, not for the new facts that are making the lives of anthropologists so miserable.

There's another type of DNA, the mitochondrial DNA: something that consists of only 37 genes, something that's been completely mapped out and analyzed. Mitochondria are small parts of your cells that tell your cells how to process energy, how to take in raw resources and convert them into something that your cells can use to power themselves. So what? There

are two unique features about mitochondrial DNA, the first being that you inherit it only from your mother. Nuclear DNA comes from both your parents; it's a mix. That's why you got your father's eyes and your mother's nose. But that's not so with mitochondrial DNA: it all comes from your mother. That's fact number one. Fact number two is that mitochondrial DNA mutates rapidly — changing 2 to 4 percent every million years (this does not affect the mitochondria's ability to process energy; these changes are neutral, not affecting their functionality). So what does this mean?

Well, you can use these two facts to create a type of dating system. Suppose that a woman has two children, both of whom inherit her mitochondrial DNA, and one of those children is a member of the first interstellar exploration team. These space travelers populate some distant star system and promptly lose all contact with Earth. Time goes by — a great deal of time. Everyone forgets that either group even exists. All records are lost, all memories lost. But then after one million years they stumble across each other, and seeing how similar they look (the slant of the eyes is different, one group no longer has facial hair, and the other group is missing its small toes and has weak chins and only 18 teeth, but the similarities are still remarkable), believe that they must be somehow related, so they check nuclear DNA and find out that they are related, are in fact members of the same species. So what happened, they ask. If they are the same species, then when did they get separated? It's easy enough to figure out: they look at their



mitochondrial DNA and see how much the genes have diverged, how much they have mutated. And when they see that these genes have changed by 2 to 4 percent, they then know that they once lived together one million years ago — that one million years ago they were a common people, some of them having the exact same mother (for this little thought experiment I've ignored the fact that the radiation-filled environment of space could have greatly altered the mutation rate).

So, if you're a geneticist and have discovered the existence of this 'clock' that's been ticking away in our cells for all these millions of years, what do you do?

You try to answer the burning question of the day.

Well, the days are the 1960s, and the burning question at that time was: when did humans diverge from the other apes? When did that ancestor exist that would be common to us and the other great apes? The anthropologists said they knew, that they had the bones — it was 15 million years ago. So two geneticists named Sarich and Wilson, back in the '60s, compared the mitochondrial DNA of humans to that of our distantly-related cousins, the chimpanzees. And they came up with a number — one that was far different from the one that the anthropologists had predicted, one that said humans did not diverge from the apes until only 5 million years ago.

Controversy — geneticists versus anthropologists.

But the controversy didn't last long. During the '70s, the anthropologists found new fossils, better fossils — new facts — and this changed their minds: they said that humans diverged from their ape siblings 5 to 7 million years ago.

Two geneticists sitting in a lab full of beakers and mitochondria had discovered this without looking at a single bone, without digging a single excavation pit.

Amazing.

So what was next? Was the controversy over? No. It was just beginning. Enter the '80s and two new geneticists, Cann and Stoneking, working under Wilson's direction, looked at the mitochondrial DNA of five different groups of women from Europe, Asia, Africa, New Guinea,

and Australia.

What should they have found, according to the anthropologists? *Homo erectus* spread out from Africa one million years ago to then evolve into the various ethnic groups of modern *Homo sapiens*. This means that these diverse population groups should show mitochondrial mutations of 2 to 4 percent.

They didn't.

The geneticists found much less mutation — mutation that says there is not a human population group in the entire world that is more than 200,000 years removed from its African origins.

200,000 years.

Controversy.

What would that mean?

It would destroy the accepted picture of how humans evolved. Instead of Neandertals and modern humans having co-evolved, a group of African *Homo erectus* turned into modern humans some 200,000 years ago, and then spread out across the world, displacing Neandertals — it would be a second African emigration.

Controversy.

Lines have been drawn. The anthropologists say that they have the anthropological evidence (bones) to disprove this. Look at the modern Australian Aborigines, they say. The bone structure in their faces can be directly related to that of Java and Peking humans, an *erectus* that existed one million years ago. Look at the sloping forehead and at the thick brows above the eyes, they say. If the geneticists are correct, say the anthropologists, that would mean that the second African migration spread out across the world, displaced all other peoples (locally-evolved *erectus* populations), and then managed to evolve into the Aborigines — a people who appear to have anatomically evolved directly from Peking and Java humans. An impossible coincidence, they say. The anthropologists use this and other fossil-derived evidence to explain why the second African emigration just cannot be.

It is impossible, they say.

Modern humans did not appear in Africa 200,000 years ago.

But there are dissenters — a few heretics in the anthropologist fold.

What destroyed the Neandertals? they ask. Why did they start to disappear some 100,000 years ago and totally vanish 30,000 years ago? If modern humans had evolved along with them, as most anthropologists claim, then why did they vanish at that time? Why not earlier? Why not ever?

Because the second invasion from Africa did occur 200,000 years ago, they answer. They even claim that they have the fossil evidence to prove it.

But then the other anthropologists fire back. Neandertals were not replaced by modern humans, they say, Neandertals evolved into modern humans. They say they've got the bones to prove it.

Who's right?

I don't know; at the moment, no one really knows. Does it make any difference? Quite possibly it doesn't — at least not to most of us. It won't change the price of a gallon of gas, teach your kids how to read any better, or unveil the miracle cure for dandruff. It won't do any of those things.

Then why even bother thinking about it?

Because it shows you how science works — how discoveries are made. Anthropologists have been digging up fossils for 300 years, each bone fragment a piece of a puzzle. They dig and they dig and they dig, building a picture, making all the pieces fit together.

That is the way of science.

But then someone else enters, an outsider, who looks at the familiar in a different light, with eyes slightly skewed. Outsiders see things that the experts have never seen before. They then present their evidence.

And what happens?

They are not believed.

They are never believed.

Not at first. Science can be a down-in-the-mud, grab-them-by-the-hair, and shove-their-faces-under-until-they-give-up-and-finally-take-a-look-at-your-data kind of process.

In this case, it's a battle of benkers versus bones.

And who will win?

In the overall scheme of things, it probably isn't all that important. But what is important is that this is an example of one of the most essential facets of science — the question-

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ing of dogma, the questioning of what everyone believes. The Earth is flat. The universe revolves around the Earth. Germs are spontaneously generated. Humans cannot fly. Humans cannot fly faster than the speed of sound. Humans cannot travel in outer space.

Humans came from Africa more than one million years ago, say the anthropologists. Humans came from Africa 200,000 years ago, say the geneticists.

That is the essence of science. Controversy.

It always has been, and always will be. It is not some cold, detached discussion made by white men in lab coats as they stroke their long white beards. No. It can be a nasty, mud-slinging shouting match, full of both data and opinion.

The truth does not come easy.

So stay tuned to this controversy, and when the dust clears, the bones are broken, and the beakers shat-

tered, we might just learn the truth. Perhaps.

If you'd like to read more about this, for light reading I would suggest the August, 1990, issue of *Discover*, containing the article "Argument over a Woman," by James Shreeve, or for those who would like a little more depth, *The Search for Eve*, by Michael H. Brown, Harper and Row Publishers, 1990. □

BOOMERANGS

Comments From Our Readers

Dear American fans:

We are writing to you with the hope that we will get your attention. Soviet fans have a small connection with foreign clubs, and we hope to make contact and receive information about American fandom.

We want to correspond with you and to exchange fanzines and other clubs' print productions. We would also like to know about the life and literary work of U.S. sf writers and dates of upcoming U.S. sf conventions, if possible.

We will be grateful if you could send us a full listing of Hugo and Nebula award winners, a copy of the Fandom Directory, or addresses of American writers and fans, if they are known to you.

If you haven't time or don't want to correspond with us, we ask you to give this letter to somebody who wants to receive and write letters to Soviet fans.

Thank you.

Fan Club "Alkor"
Andrey Kolomeic
Box 3242, Omsk 644105
USSR

Dear Mr. Ryan,

While reading "Is It Memorex?" in the May-June 1990 issue, I was reminded of the news coverage of the Pecon explosions near Las Vegas a few years back.

Pecon, a company that makes solid rocket fuel for the shuttle booster rockets, lost its entire plant in a series of spectacular explosions that shook all of Las Vegas. I remember watching the local news coverage, showing mostly amateur videos of the explosions. First came the flash, then several seconds later a loud report as the sound reached the camera.

Later, I watched the national news coverage. The same tapes were shown, but this time with dubbed-in sound. There was no time delay between the flash and the sound of the explosion. In fact, the dubbed sound wasn't even correct. Instead of the sharp ear-splitting crack, there was a deep sustained roar.

I was furious. Someone miles away from the scene took it upon him/herself to alter the tape to make it more real for the "dumb"

audience that couldn't possibly understand that light travels faster than sound. "Come on!" I fumed. "We're not that stupid, why can't you just show us the tapes?"

It's not surprising people are losing their trust of the news media, especially television news. How can you trust someone who thinks you're stupid?

Sincerely,
Richard Bush
Overton, NV

Dear Aboriginals,

Greetings. It seems my subscription is about to come to a close so I figure it's a good time to write this letter. I have been a subscriber for two years so far and have enjoyed the magazine immensely. Enough to order two years worth of back issues, anyway. In order to pay you the ultimate compliment I'm renewing for three more years.

I was very disappointed at what I found when I received issue No. 20. It wasn't the stories or the features, I never find much to complain about when it comes to those. It was the format. The half slick/half newspaper pages made me look at the cover and make sure I had the right magazine. Much to my relief I found a request for readers' opinions concerning this problem. So here goes:

Please don't sacrifice the color art work that convinced me to subscribe in the first place. I wouldn't want to lose my only full slick SF magazine, but I can see how money becomes a problem. Why not return to the format just previous to your current one? I seem to remember a magazine with durable paper pages and full color artwork. Add a durable slick cover and you've still got a fine magazine that I can enjoy. I'm sure many readers would agree.

My other reason for disappointment concerns the plastic baggie that my magazines usually come in. Whether it was because of you or the post office I don't know, but my magazine was exposed to the tortures of the U.S. Mail. The results were a badly torn and creased cover, nicks in every page, and a very stubborn label attached to the cover. If you're giving up the baggie for environ-

mental reasons, that's fine, but consider a paper envelope. Of course, that would mean killing more trees and probably isn't a very good solution. If you end up sending the magazines without protection please consider using a label glue similar to that of *Asimov's* or *Analogs*. It would prevent the destruction of cover art.

Keep up the good work (you are doing a good job) and keep those wonderful stories, poems, reviews, editorials, and whatnot coming.

Yours,
Phillip K. Jordan
Needles, CA
(How about the current format? — Ed.)

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I am very pleased with the quality of your magazine. Because I enjoy it so much, I am writing in response to your issue No. 21 editorial, "A Minor Course Correction."

First is my opinion on the full-color art in your magazine. If at all possible keep it, no black and white art. This is one of the reasons I subscribe to *Aboriginal*. Other SF magazines do not carry the full-color art inside their pages, and that is what makes *Aboriginal* different and exciting.

Second is my registered vote to do something about the Boomerangs! They take up too much room in the magazine. I would rather have another short story, other than too many letters. I do enjoy reading the letters of people, but when it becomes too excessive, there is something wrong. So either 1) limit the number of letters published, 2) edit the letters, or 3) take Boomerangs out entirely, which I wouldn't mind and neither would, ironically from the letters published, other readers.

Next, if it is ever possible, bring back the plastic covers for your magazine. It protects the magazine from the rigors of mailing and I enjoyed that.

Most of all, keep up the good work.
Mark V. Kudas
St. Peters, MO
(The plastic baggies are back. — Ed.)

(Continued to page 60)

Hot Trends in the Ol' Town Tonight

A true test of a writer having power in the film industry is having his or her name attached to the title of a film (a possessive credit usually appropriated by the director). Stephen King has come up blood red on that litmus test.

With the timely Halloween release of *Stephen King's Graveyard Shift* and this Christmas' opening of *Misery*, Stephen King has firmly established himself as a bankable crowd pleaser.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg — there are already seven more King movies in development at various studios. I'll estimate that by the end of the decade at least one dozen King films will have been made. It's a safe bet.

But don't worry if King is not your cup of tea. There is one other film trend in development ... Robin Hood. This year, Locksley and the gang will be featured in two films and one television movie.

There is a theory that once an idea is spoken it goes into the atmosphere and becomes part of the industry gestalt, ready to be used by whoever peers into the nimbus. This could well explain the recent resurgence of Robin Hood.

Kevin Costner has been signed to play Robin in the Morgan Creek Productions version, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (the original title was *Prince of Thieves*, but that title couldn't be cleared). Joining the cast are Christian Slater, Robin Wright, and Morgan Freeman, who will play Robin's friend Aslan. Shooting started in September at Shepperton Studios in England. The scheduled release by Warner Bros. is spring, 1991.

To avoid conflict with *Prince of Thieves*, 20th Century Fox will produce *The Adventures of Robin Hood* as a three-hour television movie. This *Robin Hood* was original-

ly supposed to be shot for the big screen, but after Morgan Creek Productions signed Kevin Costner, plans were quickly changed. John McTiernan, who was the director in its big-screen incarnation, will be the executive producer on the TV movie. *Adventures*, which is also being lensed in England, will be released overseas in theatres sometime in the spring.

Jason Connery will be the third Robin Hood in the Touchdown Productions, Ltd. feature, *Robin of Sherwood*, which also started filming in the fall. Connery played Robin



Stephen King

Hood in the British television series, also produced in part by Touchdown.

The end of this year saw the start date for several films. Shooting finally commenced in September on *The Pit and the Pendulum* from Full Moon Entertainment. The film stars Lance Henriksen and was adapted by Dennis Paoli from the Poe story.

September also saw the start of principal photography for Dave Stephens's *The Rocketeer* in Los Angeles and *Aliens III* in London. The credits for *Aliens III* now read: directed by David Fincher, script by John Fazano and Larry Ferguson.

Terminator II: Judgment Day began shooting in October, reuniting



Schwarzenegger and Linda Hamilton. James Cameron seems to have a monopoly on this film; he's producing, directing, and co-writing with William Wisher.

Cameron, along with Sigourney Weaver, Gale Anne Hurd (producer), and executive producers Gordon Carroll, Walter Hill, and David Giler, filed a suit against 20th Century Fox for allegedly failing to pay all the money due them on the film *Aliens*. The suit seeks unspecified damages, an accounting, and a judicial determination that the film is now in net profits.

Los Angeles Superior Court seems to be the in place. Twentieth Century Fox and director of photography Roland Smith are being sued by Jacqueline Barry, a stand-in for the *Alien Nation* series, for alleged sexual harassment. The suit seeks unspecified damages.

Ricardo Montalban has also filed a \$10-million lawsuit against Columbia claiming that the studio didn't pay him the promised five percent of the profits from *Fantasy Island*.

Back to movie-making: Dustin Hoffman will be out on a limb (so to speak) when he takes on the title role of *Captain Hook*, to be directed by Steven Spielberg. Robin Williams will play the great-grandson of Peter Pan. The production is set to roll before the cameras in either late 1990 or early 1991.

Another Spielberg directorial feature will be *Jurassic Park*. In a \$2-million package, Spielberg and Amblin Entertainment bought the rights to the book from Michael Crichton, before it was published, for \$1.5 million (with an additional \$500,000 for the screenplay). *Jurassic Park* is a theme park on a Pacific Island where

scientists genetically recreate dinosaurs. A swell idea until the dinosaurs commit a social *faux pas* by eating the scientists who created them. Then the problems begin!

George Lucas and Lucasfilm Ltd. will start production on *Red Tails* this spring. Lucas will be the executive producer on the film about the Tuskegee Airmen, a unit of courageous black World War II pilots who flew 1500 missions without losing a bomber to enemy fire.

The television commercial arm of Lucasfilm and Industrial Light and Magic has produced a commercial for Heinz tomato ketchup. Lucasfilm will also produce a young *Indiana Jones* series for ABC which, at this time, is scheduled for the fall '91 season. One of the actors suggested for the series is River Phoenix, who played the young Indy in the opening sequence of *The Last Crusade*. On the publishing front, Bantam books is publishing a series of *Indiana Jones* books to be set sometime between the films and the series.

Star Wars stocking stuffers are available this Christmas. After two years, CBS/Fox has re-released the *Star Wars* trilogy on video. Each cassette is priced at \$19.95, or \$59.98 for the boxed set. Also available is a one-hour video, *From Star Wars To Jedi — The Making of A Saga*, priced at \$9.98.

Carrie Fisher is having dual success as both an actress and a writer. Making the movie rounds is *Postcards from the Edge*, adapted by Fisher from her novel of the same title. (*Postcards* won the prestigious Los Angeles PEN award for best first novel.) Her next screenplay, *Surrender the Pink*, is scheduled to go into production at the end of '90 for Steven Spielberg. Carrie Fisher will also star with Phoebe Cates, comedian Rik Mayall, Marsha Mason, and Tim Matheson in *Drop Dead Fred*. The plot revolves around a young woman who is visited by an invisible friend.

Some more film and television news:

The rights to *The Saint* have been bought from Leslie Charteris by Paramount for a feature release. Robert (*The Two Jakes*) Evans will produce.

Bill & Ted will visit the nether regions in *Bill & Ted Go to Hell*, scheduled for release July 3.

Dan O'Bannon (co-writer of *Total*

Recall) will direct the science fiction thriller *Shatterbrain*, written by Brent Friedman.

Biohazard is an action-adventure film set in the future, starring Marc Singer, formerly of *Beastmaster* fame.

Those heroes on a half-shell will be back on March 22 in the second *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* movie from New Line Cinema. (Statistics, the first film grossed an estimated \$131 million.)

Twenty-First Century Film Corp. and Menahem Golan have bought the rights to *Spiderman*. Negotiations are under way with Columbia to get a 1991 start date for the film. Another 21st Century comic hero who didn't fare so well is *Captain America*. At the present time, The Cap is sitting on the shelf with no release date in sight.

Roger Corman is back at the helm for a sequel to his low-budget, hybrid monster flick, *The Terror Within*. The cast includes Andrew Stevens in a threefold job of acting, writing, and directing. Also in the pipeline from Corman are *Son of Little Shop of Horrors* and *Barbarian Queen III*.

Frank Miller (*Robocop II*) has declined the offer to write number three for Orion after being asked to sign a collaboration deal with the director, a currently popular, however invidious, industry practice. Good for you, Frank!

The Oscar-winning team of Howard Ashman and Alan Menken (who wrote the lyrics and music to Disney's *The Little Mermaid*) are now writing the songs for an animated *Beauty and the Beast* feature. Alan Menken's music will also be used for the stage musical *Weird Romance*, which is based, in part, on Alan Brennert's story and *Twilight Zone* episode, "Her Pilgrim Soul." A collection of Brennert's stories, including the title story, "Her Pilgrim Soul," will be published in December by Tor Books. (Alan Brennert was one of the creative team behind the second *Twilight Zone* series.)

Distributed by Premiere Home Video is a 50-minute documentary, *Liftoff! An Astronaut's Journey*, written by Mark Pritchard and Dan Wetherbee. The video follows the five crew members (including pilot Jim Wetherbee, the writer's brother) of the STS-32 mission from early training to a night landing of the shuttle *Columbia*. The documentary is narrated by Patrick Stewart of *Star Trek*.

The Next Generation. One nice thing to note: a portion of the proceeds from the video (priced at \$19.95) will be donated to the Challenger Center.

And, beginning in January, Nick at Nite will start showing 130 episodes of *Get Smart*.

USA Network has a new anthology show, called *The Hidden Room*, about to debut. You can expect the stories to be in the psychological horror vein.

At the mention of horror and veins, back to Stephen King:

Laurel Entertainment has invested in the King phenomenon for the '90s. Their list of movie adaptations will include *Tales From the Darkside The Movie II*, screenplay by Michael McDowell and Gahan Wilson, based on stories by Robert Bloch and Gahan Wilson, and on Stephen King's "The Cat From Hell"; *The Night Flyer*; *The Stand*, screenplay by Rospo Pallenberg; and *Thinner*, screenplay by Michael McDowell.

Creepshow 3 is in the early stages of development with a tentative list of four King stories: "Dolan's Cadillac," "The Rainy Season," "Popsy," and an original, "Pinfall."

A go-ahead has also been given for the screen adaptation of King's 1969 novel *The Dark Half*. George Romero is set to direct this feature.

Additionally, on the Laurel playbill is the adaptation of the Dan Simmons novel *Carrion Comfort*, with a screenplay by Simmons and Ed Bryant, and *Little Heroes*, based on Norman Spinrad's novel.

Other movies in development:

From Trans Atlantic Pictures: *Children of the Corn II* and *Hellraiser III*.

From Cinergi Productions: *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* by Douglas Adams, best known for his *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series.

From Vidmark Entertainment. Dean Koontz's *Servants of Twilight*.

From Cinetel Films: *976-Evil II*.

From Sullivan Bluth Studios: *A Troll in Central Park* (animated).

From The Production Line Sales Company: *Maniac Cop III*.

And, finally, the New Year should bring in with news that the much-talked-about Sci-Fi Channel will now start broadcasting in early 1991. □

Four Down, and Four Thousand to go



Happy birthday to us... Happy birthday to us... It's hard to believe that *Aboriginal Science Fiction* has finished four full years of publication and that this is the first issue of our fifth year. If you count the year of preparation we undertook before launching that first issue at the 1986 Worldcon in Atlanta, Georgia, *Aboriginal* is really five years old! Pretty amazing (and we don't mean that *other* magazine), when you realize most so-called experts predicted only digest-sized SF magazines could succeed. Too bad they didn't consult *Aboriginal Science Fiction*'s readers, who, fortunately, knew better.

To put it in perspective, several other magazines started at the same time (and several more since then), and they aren't around any more. This includes the new incarnation of *If* and the more recent *Starshore* to name just two.

That gives you a little bit of an idea of how difficult it is to try to publish a magazine in a country that has allowed conglomerates to convince everyone that if it isn't big, it shouldn't exist. And to be big, you have to appeal to mass markets, otherwise known as the lowest common denominator.

So, considering that the U.S. has slipped to a less than thrilling position when it comes to literacy (what else do you expect with everyone glued to their TV-VCRs?), it's tough to launch any publication that requires reading. And guess where else we're slipping — an area in which we once led the world — yeah, technology (and technical literacy). Somehow or other the system has failed and children, who are inherently filled with wonder, are getting that wonder of science pounded out of them to the point where most of them end up rating science and

scientists somewhere below politicians in value or importance.

That means that attempts to publish a science fiction magazine face a double whammy. The increase in illiteracy in literature is in a neck-and-neck race with the increase in scientific illiteracy.

The news publications in the U.S. would rather write about "trash TV" and bad movies (and the people who act in them) than anything to do with reading. At the same time, those organizations adopt pious postures on fighting illiteracy. Want to test that postulate? Flip through any newspaper or newsmagazine, and the odds are pretty high that you will find many more pages devoted to the television and movie industry than to books or magazines — even though there are probably 100 or more books published to every video released.

But, flying blissfully in the face of that lemming-like trend to self-destruction, here we are, alive and kicking. And since it's our birthday, we've decided to throw a party of sorts. No, we can't invite you and all the rest of our subscribers to one big party; we haven't a big enough living room — there are over 16,000 of you now. But we have concocted some presents and surprises.

As the first surprise, *Interzone*'s editor David Pringle and I have cooked up a special performance for our May 1991 issue, which will be published here, as usual, and then again in England as a special "Aboriginal" issue of *Interzone*. For that special issue we will have appearances by three Hugo winners, including the long-promised short story by Harlan Ellison (called "Darkness Upon the Face of the Deep"), and stories by Lawrence Watt-Evans ("Targets") and Frederik Pohl ("The Matter of Beaupré"). Also joining us for that special issue will be Lois Tilton with

"The Cry of a Seagull," Wil McCarthy with "Amerikano Hiaika," and Mark Clarkson and Gary Mitchell with "Like a Flithiss from its Shell."

In the following issue of *Aboriginal* we will publish all of the normal editorial contents of the June issue of *Interzone*, an excellent magazine with little distribution in America. I'm not sure if it was the Heinekens we raised in toast after the Hugo ceremony in The Hague, or maybe Pringle and I took a cue from our crazy Alien Publisher — anyhow, we devised the concept at the 1990 World Science Fiction Convention.

Interzone, now in its ninth year, is the largest science fiction magazine in the United Kingdom, and has been nominated for a Hugo Award for each of the past five years. So you will all be in for some good reading — as is the case for *Interzone*'s readers. They'll be treated to our stories and artists (and no, we won't skip color for that issue). *Interzone*'s artists will be doing their illustrations in color just for the occasion).

Now, what's a birthday celebration without presents? We have finally decided to yield to a number of requests we've had for a special lifetime subscription to *Aboriginal Science Fiction* for the sum of \$250. Just fork over a paltry \$250 and you'll never have to fill out another renewal form and you'll be guaranteed a lifetime of entertainment from *Aboriginal*. (Sorry, but using cryogenics or cloning will void the offer.) You can send the check to our regular mailing address. (Oh, we're going to kick ourselves in the morning, we just know it.)

Anyway, go on and bake a cake, invite a few friends over, and celebrate *Aboriginal*'s birthday along with us. □

The Transformative Ethic

By Doug Franklin

Art by David Cherry

PIC *Chrysanthemum* calling Mendel Station. Come in, Mendel Station.

The call echoed through the research station's empty corridors. Down in the lowest level of the station, Ian Morley pushed off from a demo stage in irritation. The damned thing wasn't working right, and it wasn't any fault of his. It was some stupid mechanical problem that any child could fix. But it was going to take time, time that could have been better spent doing real work. Not trying to find a stuck air valve so he could put on a show for some company Rep who wouldn't understand what she was looking at anyway.

Ian drifted across the small lab to its console. The station's laserscope had already locked onto the source of the message, and the console showed a view of the incoming PIC vessel through the laserscope's optics. This close in to the station, the spacecraft's fusion torch was far brighter than anything else in the sky. PIC's logo pulsed on and off over the image, demanding Ian's attention. Reluctantly, he tapped the logo, and it opened into a view of the *Chrysanthemum's* cockpit.

"Mendel Station," he said curtly.

The *Chrysanthemum's* pilot turned towards the camera. The face on the screen was framed with short dark hair and possessed a delicate nose that bespoke an Asian heritage. "Madori Beecher, representing Pallas Industrial Complex. Doctor Morley, I presume?"

Ian nodded.

"I'm about an hour out, Doctor. Is everything ready?"

An hour was more than enough time to fix the demo stage. He cleared his throat. "Yes, Representative."

"Very good," she said. "I'm looking forward to meeting you in person, Doctor."

"Likewise," Ian replied, trying his best to look sincere. The laser link cut out, and his smile disappeared with it. He did not at all appreciate PIC's insistence on a personal demonstration of the virus he'd developed; he was an intensely private man. He had lived most of his life alone, and he liked it that way.

"Why couldn't they just accept an upload and be done with it?" he asked aloud.

"Don't be naive," the station's computer replied in a pleasantly androgynous voice. "You could fake the data, and they know it."

"If I didn't need the money ..." he started.

"You'd do it anyway, for the recognition. Which you deserve. The work you've done here in the last year is revolutionary, and you know it."

Ian smiled. The computer knew that appealing to his ego would calm him down. Nonetheless, his motive was purely capitalistic. He didn't give a rat's ass about the rest of humanity, but he needed money to keep the station going. And this was the best way to get it, the only way that let him work on his own projects and get paid for it. With a sigh he returned to the demo stage. He was going to have to take it completely apart to get at the faulty

valve.

He barely had time to reassemble the stage before the *Chrysanthemum* arrived, and he didn't have time to test it. He hurriedly towed the valve grease off his hands and headed up to the station's dock, emerging from the cloistered lower level into late-afternoon sunlight. He'd built the station into a crater at Eugenia's north pole and capped it with a transparent dome. The plants and animals that the dome sheltered formed the backbone of the station's life-support system, and were the best examples of his work. Loosed from the grip of Earth's gravity, spindly birch trees had grown at arbitrary angles through the tangles of alder that dotted the crater floor. There was a continuous rustle of motion in the treetops; under the influence of his virus, the birch leaves had developed swivel joints that allowed them to compensate for the asteroid's spin.

Twenty meters overhead, the dome's graceful arch culminated in a cylindrical airlock. The *Chrysanthemum* had arrived and was in the final stages of docking. Thrusters flared silently, turning the ship around the axis of its massive fusion drive. Clustered around the drive were the usual pods: fuel tanks, boosters, laserscope, living quarters. Ian's eyes narrowed when he spotted a pair of missile racks. Then he shrugged. Without a unifying authority in the Belt, a ship that couldn't defend itself was risking piracy. For that matter, PIC had already fended off a hostile takeover attempt that year. They were just being careful.

The living quarters' airlock lined up with the station's, and the two locked together in a mechanical embrace.

"Let her in," he instructed the station's computer. Above him, the inner lock flashed a warning light. Moments later, the Pallas Representative floated head first through the dilated iris, a little hesitant in the face of the alien life below her.

"Welcome to Eugenia," Ian called up to her.

She waved, then launched herself towards him, tumbling leisurely through a half circle to land on her feet beside him. In contrast to Ian's baggy pants and utility vest, she wore a lightly armored spacesuit fitted with a high-power laser.

"A routine precaution," the Rep said, noting the direction of his gaze. Her voice was distorted by the speaker built into the suit's helmet. "I understand your work involves viruses. This is just a safeguard against infection."

"There's little chance of that," he said. "I've lived here five years, and never had a problem." The spacesuit bothered him far more than the missiles; it implied that he was a threat.

"You're an expert," she said. "I wouldn't even know what to avoid. And I have a family to protect."



Something in her expression made him think that she knew he lived alone, that, in fact, she probably knew most of the particulars of his solitary life. He looked away uneasily, and on impulse bent down and pinched off a blossom from a nearby patch of *Ranunculus*. The fist-sized flower twisted slowly on its stem, tracking the sun. The interior of the flower had a metallic yellow tint, and at the focus of the parabola of petals the slender filaments were tipped with dark, fleshy nodules. He held the flower out to her. She took it gingerly in a gloved hand.

"This is an infected organism," he said. "As you can see, it's quite healthy. Usually, the combination of low gravity and diminished sunlight that you find out in the Belt is anathema to plants. But the virus has modified this organism's genetic structure, allowing it to adapt to its environment."

"Most intriguing," she murmured politely. She dropped the blossom into a collection bag at her waist and sealed it. "But as I recall, your contract with Pallas was to develop a cure for the banes, not new varieties of plant life."

"But I have," he said. "A general-purpose cure. This is just one example."

Inside the helmet, her face was impassive.

"Come down to the lab with me," he said. "I've arranged a demo."

The demo stage resembled nothing more than an oversized clothes drier. Ian opened the stage's circular hatch to reveal the centrifuge within. "This device can provide almost any combination of acceleration, air pressure, and ambient radiation," Ian said. "We'll use it to test a pair of voles."

"Voles?"

"The species is indigenous to arctic biomes." He opened a specimen cage and selected a dun-colored animal the size of a mouse. He held up the vole's foreleg to show the bright red bracelet of plastic that encircled it. "This animal is the control. He doesn't have the virus."

He placed the vole in the demo stage, then pulled an identical animal out of the cage. Its foreleg was decorated with a blue bracelet. "This one is lucky," he said. "He got a shot this morning, and that's going to keep him alive when we crank the acceleration up to five gees and give him a dose of X-rays."

"Is it really necessary to destroy both animals?" Beecher asked.

"Of course not," Ian said mildly. "So long as you're willing to take my word that both were raised in Eugenia's centrigavity, and that the new environmental conditions I'm imposing would normally be fatal to them both."

It only took a moment for her to make up her mind. "Carry on," she said.

He placed the infected vole in the centrifuge, shut the hatch, and started the demo cycle. With a low whine, the centrifuge began to spin. The air pressure readout dipped a little, then held steady at ninety percent Terrestrial. He let out a silent breath of relief, reassured that he'd fixed the problem with the valve.

He turned his back on the stage. "When I first started this project, I was looking for a specific solution to a specific problem: the banes. But what do radiation poisoning and calcium depletion have in common? Very little, besides the fact that they both afflict space travelers. I

might have been able to develop specific cures for each condition, but there'd have been synergistic effects that would've taken years to sort out. So I focused on the root of the problem."

"The environment," she said flatly, eyes fixed on the speed-blurred contents of the centrifuge behind him. The set of her mouth revealed her distaste for the whole procedure. Ian felt a twinge of regret. He was not a cruel man. But sometimes the nature of his work required that he do cruel things. At these times he donned the carefully neutral mask of a professional scientist.

He nodded. "That's right. The real problem is that people haven't adapted to the space environment. Their bones are brittle from too much time in low gravity, and they get shot full of radiation if they come out from their shielding. They're stuck, too weak to travel in anything but the biggest, slowest transports, and are forever barred from planetary surfaces. So I built a virus that responds to environmental stress by altering its host's genetic material. Classic negative feedback; the virus acts to reduce the stress on the organism. Very simple, really."

"An elegant solution to a difficult problem."

"Thank you." He was pleased that she saw the beauty of it.

"But don't you think people might have problems with having their genetic material altered?"

"In an emotional sense?" He was a little puzzled by her question.

"In a marketing sense," she said. "Doctor, we have to sell this thing. I'm not sure people are going to buy it. From what I understand, it would dynamically engineer their DNA. That's a little radical for most people."

A beep sounded from the console behind him. He glanced over his shoulder to see what the problem was. The air pressure was dropping, the same as before. So he hadn't fixed the stage after all. He considered stopping the demo, but that wouldn't bode well for his contract.

"For the purposes of this demo," he spoke without taking his eyes off the pressure readout, "this particular virus has a very fast response time. Coupled with the small size and high metabolism of the test subject, transformations can occur in a matter of minutes. For humans, the changes would probably take anywhere from several days to several weeks. The end result would be a body that didn't suffer from radiation poisoning, nor from calcium depletion. Its bones wouldn't break, its children wouldn't die in the womb. A cure for the banes, Representative."

"The time scale of the process is not the issue," she said. "The point is that through the agency of your virus, people would become something else. Maybe it would be stronger, maybe it would be better adapted to life in space. But it wouldn't be *human*. And that does not make good ad copy, Doctor Morley."

He faced her again without touching the abort switch. It was too late anyway; the air pressure was holding steady at zero. "Representative, I've raised generations of animals with the virus. The changes always stabilize when stress is relieved." The centrifuge began to spin down. "People would be no more different than if they'd received a vaccination against a new disease."

Her eyes said that she did not believe him. She raised her chin at the demo stage. "Let's see what you've made in there."

He turned to the stage, raised his eyebrows in false

surprise. "It seems to have lost pressure," he said. "There must be a bad valve. Blue had to cope with an extra variable, I'm afraid." In the cold fluorescent light that flooded the lab, the blur on the other side of the hatch flickered down to a series of stroboscopic images. One vole was obviously dead, strangled on its own blood. Hunkered on the floor of the centrifuge, the other seemed frozen, its eyes shut tight against the vacuum. Then the side of the animal slowly flexed as if something else were inside its skin, trying to get out.

Despite the layers of protection between her and the creature within the stage, Beecher backed away. "My god," she said. "What is it?"

"It looks like some kind of cocoon," he said distantly. He was already mentally recalculating his budget based on not getting his contract renewed. If he couldn't find another patron, it was going to be very tight. At least the ecosystem in the dome would keep basic life-support going while he looked for funding.

The vole's flank split open. The creature inside got its claws through the split and pulled itself out of the leather casing. It didn't look much like a vole anymore; the closest terrestrial analog was an old-world chameleon. As they watched in horrified fascination, it spasmed and died.

Beecher looked like she was going to be sick.

"Not a fair test," Ian muttered.

"What?"

He cleared his throat. "I said it wasn't a fair test. An animal can only change so much, so fast."

Her eyes searched his. "Doctor Morley, I think you've been living alone too long. You've lost touch with the rest of us. This," she gestured at the demo stage, "is completely unacceptable. I'm afraid we're going to have to drop your contract."

Ian had a strange feeling of standing outside himself. "Yes," he said, "I thought as much. Well, thank you for your time, Representative."

"Good day," she said with finality.

After a few days of self-recrimination, Ian put the failure behind him. Life went on, after all, and he had work to do. He'd never suspected that the virus might be able to adapt an organism to vacuum, and the potential intrigued him. Perhaps Beecher was right. Humanity might not be ready to reap the benefits of his work personally, but they'd be more than eager to utilize its by-products, plants and animals raised on native asteroid material, without the expense of domes and shielding and soil preparation.

He established a remote test site a few kilometers from the station, at the edge of a crater field. In the midst of a wilderness of fantastically sculpted forms, monuments to the simple mechanics of differential cooling, he sowed a variety of infected seeds. This would be his new garden, his new beginning. He was digging a hole for one of the larger bulbs when his suit picked up a faint whisper of laser light. Mendel Station was over the horizon; the transmission had to be coming from somewhere off the asteroid.

He set down the digger and switched the helmet's receiver array from omni to directional. The whisper turned into Madori Beecher's voice, riding a tight beam all the way from Pallas. "...briefed my superiors here at PIC on the situation on Eugenia, and they've instructed

me to repossess all equipment lent to you in the course of your contract."

"Shit," he said under his breath. It would be next to impossible to carry on his work without that equipment.

"However, in their opinion and mine, the risk of contamination is too high to allow the equipment to leave Eugenia, or to even attempt to remove it from Mendel Station." For a long moment the only thing he heard was the hiss of random photons. When she resumed, her voice had lost the official edge it had carried before. "I'm sorry, Doctor Morley. We have little choice but to destroy the station. Of course, we'll credit your estate for the loss..."

"My estate?" he screamed. Without realizing he'd done it, he'd sprung from his position beside the digger, and was drifting in a lazy parabola a dozen meters over the surface of the asteroid. "What about me? What about —" A flare of light lit the horizon, and his suit speaker screamed as the electromagnetic pulse slashed through the lasercom's circuits. He landed clumsily, nearly losing his balance, but the claws built into his boots bit into the icy regolith and held him upright.

She must have left a missile in orbit around the asteroid when she left, he realized numbly. Too bad he hadn't checked the radar. He glanced down at the helmet's dosimeter and grimaced. Lethal dose. He shouldn't have jumped; the horizon might have shielded him if he'd stayed on the surface. Of course, then the ground wave would have pulverized him. At least that would have been quick. As it was, it was going to be a race between lack of air and radiation poisoning, and he wasn't going to be around to congratulate the winner.

He made his way over to his supply cache, fighting to keep panic at bay. His tool box was battered but intact, as were three of the air tanks. The tanks were good for eight hours apiece at a normal rate of usage. If he could cut his consumption in half, he had forty-eight hours to live. A tide of fear rose within him as he imagined suffocating in the suit. He forced himself to take a deep breath and let it out again. There were always options.

He pulled the tool box out. The inner surface of the lid was coated with a glittering layer of ice crystals; the precious vials within had been shattered. He pawed through the mess, turning up useless shards of glass and ice, sensors, and spools of microtubing. There. He carefully extracted a vial from the jumble. The serum within moved languidly in Eugenia's centigravity, surface tension holding it together like a slug of mercury. The label identified the bottle's contents as one of the faster viruses, but that was good, that was what he needed. He wasn't a vole; even with a couple of days to let the virus propagate through his body, it would be close. He loaded the vial into a heavy-duty hypodermic, then got a patch out of his suit-repair kit. He peeled off its backing and laid it on his knee.

It was a simple choice, really: change or die. He didn't have to think about it very long. He pressed the snout of the hypodermic hard against his bicep and pulled its trigger. There was a moment of stinging cold, then an expanding circle of numbness. An alarm blinked urgently in the helmet readout. He dropped the hypodermic into the repair kit, picked up the patch, and pressed it over the fine jet of air coming from his arm. The spreading chill halted and began a slow retreat.

The *Chrysanthemum*'s search radar strobed through Ian Morley's mind, a brilliant flickering sound. He woke up slowly, sliding in from the edge of death. His pulse increased and stabilized at twelve beats per minute. He opened his eyes onto dark confinement, thinking that the sound was his suit's low air alarm. After he'd injected himself, he'd spent most of his time sleeping, only waking when the alarm had gone off. But this sound was clearly different. Besides, the sedative he'd given himself when he'd neared the end of the last tank should've seen him through its exhaustion. And that thought brought him up short. He glanced towards the helmet's readout, but the power seemed to be out; he couldn't see a thing. He strained to hear the familiar sounds of the suit's air-circulation system, but the only sound was the dull thud of his heart and the anomalous, unidentifiable flicker of the search radar.

He hadn't really believed that the virus would work; the changes required were too extensive, the time too short. But there was no other reasonable explanation. He thought back to the vole, encased in a cocoon made of its own skin, and the cold, close darkness took on a different meaning. He levered his elbow back and the material that bound him gave slightly. Harder, and it split. Operating on a blind, instinctual level, he backed out of his shed flesh, twisting and pushing until he emerged into sunlight.

Eyes narrowed against the unaccustomed glare, he examined himself clinically. His fingers and toes were more like a lizard's than a man's, and the claws that tipped them had a metallic gleam. The epidermis had hardened and taken on a dark, greenish-grey color. But the basic structure was the same; the changes wrought by the virus were extensive, but relatively superficial. Most of its work had involved reprogramming cells rather than replacing them.

His suit lay nearby where he'd cast it off during the dream-fever of the transformation. He retrieved the helmet and looked inside at its readout. It had been nearly a week. He stripped off the tool belt and wrapped it around his waist. It was much too large; he'd lost a lot of mass. Faced with a lack of oxygen, the virus must have switched his cells over to a self-consuming anaerobic metabolism. He tied the ends of the belt together and rifled through its pouches until he found his gyrocompass. He flipped open the device and twisted it so he could see his reflection in the sight mirror. An alien eye looked back at him, an eye cased in heavy green lids and silvered against solar radiation.

The *Chrysanthemum*'s radar strobed him again, louder this time, and he saw a flicker of light overhead as the ship rotated to bring its laserscope to bear. Before he could move, he was pinned in a monochromatic spotlight as Beecher scanned him. He didn't wait for her to make up her mind about what she was seeing; he jumped. Behind him the laserscope's beam turned hot, and the surface of the rock exploded under the thermal stress. A shard caught him in the shoulder with a bruising force, set him spinning. He came down as fast as he'd gone up, tumbling across the uneven ground. When he gained his feet, he jumped again, but this time he kept his trajectory low, skimming over the ice. The beam probed somewhere off to his right, laser light flashing through a geyser of superheated vapor.

On sudden inspiration, he veered towards the blue afterimage of the beam. As he'd hoped, the laserscope had blasted a cavern into Eugenia's icy regolith. He dived into the gaping hole, landed hard on a glazed wall. He nearly bounced off, but his claws held in the ice, and he hung there in the reflected sunlight like a giant, tailless chameleon.

He was starting to feel light-headed. He hadn't taken a breath since he'd woken up, hadn't even felt the need to do so, but a dull pounding behind his eyes told him that his exertions had taken a toll. Had the virus failed to provide for long-term viability, blindly opting for a short-term solution instead? He shut his eyes, listening to the dark red rush of blood, and willed himself to relax. His pulse slowed, and for the first time he noticed a subtle tingling where he was exposed to sunlight. He turned so the light splashed across his chest.

The tingling intensified as the chloroplasts in his skin went to work, converting light and water and the carbon dioxide in his blood to sugar and oxygen. The virus had read the oldest programs in his cells, had found the legacy of the blue-green bacteria that had preceded all higher life and taken advantage of it. But Eugenia was far from the sun, and Ian's need for energy was greater than any plant's. He measured the geometry of the ice cavern with his eyes, noting the angle of the sun in relation to the curved walls. Hanging from his claws, he hand-walked along the underside of the overhanging ledge to the focus of the cavern, the point where the reflected rays of sunlight converged.

It was barely enough. He basked in the sunlight, a golden haze erasing all thought of danger until a small sound brought him back. The sputtering noise rose faintly above the background rush of the solar wind, and was unmistakably artificial. He hand-walked to the lip of the cavern and chinned over the ledge to look out in the direction of the sound. The *Chrysanthemum* settled down at the outskirts of the crater field, electric-arc thrusters flickering in time to the noise. The living quarters' airlock opened, and Beecher jumped down to the surface.

Ian ducked back out of sight. Pallas must have detected signs of his survival and sent Beecher back to finish the job. He looked around the cavern. It wasn't nearly big enough to hide him. If she found it — and he was sure she would — he'd be trapped, gunned down. He had to get out and take his chances in the open. But ultimately, there was nowhere to run, without a ship. His best bet would be to steal the *Chrysanthemum* while Beecher was searching for him, steal it and run some place where they wouldn't find him. There were plenty of unexplored rocks left in the Belt.

But first he had to get past Beecher, and that was not going to be easy. She had a laser; all he had was a set of claws. Much as he wanted to get out of the cavern, it would not be a good move. She could cut him down at a distance as easily as up close. No, he was going to have to tackle her hand-to-hand, disable her somehow, and then run for it. Ian hadn't been in a fight since his childhood, and the thought of going up against Beecher frightened him badly. She had the advantages of greater mass, firepower, and endurance. The only factor on his side was surprise; she didn't know exactly where he was, or even if he was still alive.

He hand-walked back to where the ledge that formed

the roof of the cavern met the wall and anchored himself in the corner, knees up against his chest. He tried to call up a memory of Beecher's suit, where the armor was located, where its weak spots were. But his fear got in the way of the image, painting vivid pictures of his own body cut open by the hard light, steaming in the vacuum. He shut his eyes, bringing a wall of darkness across the despair he felt. He would survive. He would do whatever he had to do. He would kill her if he had to. He pictured himself smashing her helmet against the ice, breaking it open to hard vacuum like she'd broken his dome, leaving a wilderness of death behind where life had been.

He saw her shadow first, cutting across the sunlight that filled the cavern. She walked around the hole in the crust, shining a low-power beam on the walls. Ian hung motionless, hoping that if he were visible at all through the ice, he looked like an impurity, a cyst of carbon embedded in Eugenia's skin.

She stopped opposite him, and he tensed. If she jumped into the hole now, she'd see him immediately. But instead she kneeled and put her head down below the surface so she could look inside. *Moment of truth*, Ian thought. He launched himself across the cavern, slamming into the back of her helmet. If she hadn't been suited, the blow would've broken her neck. As it was, the helmet's yoke broke her collarbone, and she cartwheeled down into the hole with Ian.

He'd hit too hard to keep his grip on her; he rebounded off the floor and twisted to take the next bounce on his feet. With a fury that amazed him, he landed on her back and wrapped his legs around her waist. He grabbed her laser arm in one hand as she struggled to knock him off, and ripped at the laser's power feed with his other. The cable was armored, but the inside of the elbow joint on the other side had been left unprotected. His claws caught in the fabric, tore through it and the brachial artery below. Air and blood geysered past his face. He released her, sickened by the sight. For a moment he hesitated, his instincts and training saying he should help her. Then he turned and ran.

It didn't take him long to reach the ship; she'd landed near the test site. He opened the access panel that shielded the airlock controls. The readout under the panel blinked at him: ENTER ACCESS CODE. Ian stared at the message, his mind churning through alternatives. The access code could be anything. Beecher had mentioned a family, but no specific names. In fact, he knew very little about her besides the fact that she worked for Pallas Industrial Complex.

It was tempting to hit the controls, try to break through the control panel and hot-wire the airlock. But more likely than not, that would trigger a response from the *Chrysanthemum*'s computer. And if the ship's designer had half a brain, he'd have shielded the airlock controller from just that kind of tampering. He backed away from the living quarters' hull, looking up to the cockpit at its bow. The curve of glass that encased the pilot's position was barely visible from where he stood. He retreated further for a better view, casting about at the same time for a rock. He found something much better: the digger.

He returned to the ship with the tool. Cradling the device in his arms, he gauged the distance to the ship carefully, crouched, and jumped. From the top of his trajectory, he saw Beecher emerge from the cavern, and

felt a curious mix of relief and dread. He was glad he hadn't killed her, but he sincerely hoped he'd hurt her badly enough that she couldn't use the laser.

He landed softly on top of the dome that shielded the cockpit. The polycarbonate was tough; it didn't shatter when he first holed it, but it wasn't designed to withstand deliberate abuse. In a few minutes he'd created a rough-edged doorway. He shoved the digger inside, then followed it into the evacuated cockpit. Shards of plastic covered the acceleration couch. He swept them aside and sat down. The flight controls were locked, but that didn't matter. He opened his suit-repair kit and pulled out the heavy-duty hypodermic. As he'd thought, there was enough serum left in it for another injection.

Perhaps Beecher had been right when she said he'd lived alone too long. When she reached the ship, he'd give her a choice. She could kill him, and then suffocate, or she could become like him. He thought he knew what her choice would be. □

1990 Boomerang Awards

Another full year has gone by, and it's time again for you, our readers, to tell us what stories, illustrations, and poems you liked best — in other words, it's Boomerang Award time. We've listed the eligible entries below. Pick you choice for Best Story, Best Art, and Best Poem, and send the list to *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, 1990 Boomerang Awards, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888.

Jan.-Feb. 1990 — "No Prisoners" by George Alec Effinger, art by Robert J. Pasternak; "First Full-Contact" by Bruce Bethke, art by David Deitrick; "The Gateway Concordance, Part 1" by Frederik Pohl, art by Frank Kelly Freas; "Liquid Jade" by John W. Randall, art by Cortney Skinner; "In the Chips" by Lou Fisher, art by Robert J. Pasternak; "UFO Aliens Shared My Apartment" by Bonita Kale, art by Larry Blamire; Cover Art of Neptune seen from Triton by Bob Eggleton

March-April 1990 — "A Month of Sundays" by Gregor Hartmann, art by Larry Blamire; "Peacekeeper" by David Brin, art by David Deitrick; "The Gateway Concordance, Part 2" by Frederik Pohl, art by Frank Kelly Freas; "Frost King" by E. Michael Blake, art by David Brian; "Technomancy" by Steve Martindale, art by Larry Blamire; "Ride 'Em Cyboy" by Jennifer Roberson, art by Larry Blamire; Poems: "Soliloquy at the Tomb of Earth" by David Lunde; "The Long Hot Silence" by Jovanka Kink

May-June 1990 — "Coyote on Mars" by Patricia Anthony, art by Carol Heyer; "Self Similar" by Robert A. Metzger, art by David Brian; "What I Did With the OTV Grissom" by Wil McCarthy, art by David Brian; "The Gateway Concordance, Part 3" by Frederik Pohl, art by Frank Kelly Freas; "Queen of the Atzu" by Phillip C. Jennings, art by Larry Blamire; "Requiem Aeternam" by Richard Bowker, art by Wendy Snow-Lang; Poem: "Leaving the Sea of Suns" by Jovanka Kink

July-August 1990 — "Three Boston Artists" by Sarah Smith, art by Carol Heyer; "The Bogart Revival" by Joel Henry Sherman, art by Charles Lang; "Birdbrain" by Elaine Radford, art by David Brian; "Eyes of Chaos" by Robert A. Metzger, art by Carol Heyer; "Oscar Carvalho, Spaciat" by James Stevens-Arce, art by David Brian; "How I Wrote the New Testament, Ushered in the Renaissance, and Birdied the 17th Hole at Pebble Beach" by Mike Reenick, art by Lucy Synk; "A Matter of Taste" by Esther M. Friesner, art by Larry Blamire; Poem: "To an Android Lover" by Holly Lisle

Sept.-Oct. 1990 — "Jet-Dancer" by James C. Glass, art by Cortney Skinner; "Survival of the Fittest" by John Gribbin & Marcus Chown, art by David Brian; "U F O" by Michael Swanwick, art by Robert Pasternak; "Story Child" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch, art by Lori Deitrick; "Random Access" by Erick Melton, art by Lucy Synk; "Russian Roulette" by Phillip C. Jennings, art by Lori Deitrick; Poem: "Same Song, Different Star" by Anne K. Schwader

Nov.-Dec. 1990 — "The Undiscovered Country" by Lynn S. Hightower, art by Carol Heyer; "God's Bullets" by Rory Harper, art by Charles Lang; "Henry, Have You Gone to the Moon?" by Steven Forstner, art by Carol Heyer; "Life Support System" by Lois Tilton, art by Wendy Snow-Lang; "Serving the Market" by Steve Henson, art by Pat Morrissey; "Given the Game" by Daniel Keys Moran, art by Charles Lang; Poem: "Mist Gathering" by David Lunde.

The Honeymoon

By Sandra Paradise

Art by Sandra Paradise

I don't want to do this anymore," she said suddenly, breaking the silence in the limousine.

Her husband's profile, elegant and refined, did not even turn to her. His lips pursed, expelling silver smoke that hung in the air like the ghost of a mournful child.

He settled his slick, bald head on the deep, red velvet cushion of the back seat. With the delicate touch of a ringed finger, his window slid open a tiny, tiny bit, and the smoke was snatched away. "Just keep looking," he said, and closed his eyes.

She sighed, an inaudible, controlled breath, and leaned her head against her window. Outside the smug curves of the black limousine, the world was spaces of darkness, punctuated with neon and hot lights that branded the retina, and silent siren-songs of casinos and strip joints.

The waxen face of a tired woman, with hollowed eyes and clown-red mouth, regarded her gravely from the glass. She stared at her own reflection, trapped before her eyes, while the limousine hunted the streets like a shark in murky water.

There were new creases about her eyes, deepening furrows between her brows. Her fingers absently sought the once-silky flesh of her neck, and found creepy folds; the fingertips themselves were gnawed and sandpaper-rough. Time's slippage was slowly claiming her; pieces of herself were spilling, sinking, sliding away. Her creamy skin with its confetti-sprinkling of freckles looked like a doughy cake reflected in the bathroom mirror that morning; her body was melting vanilla ice cream, everything was loose, falling. Her breasts hung heavy, their pink nipples like eyes downcast; her belly and hips were dimpled with pockets of fat. Flaccid blue veins wove their weary way from heart to toenails, fingertips, scalp, and her drooping abdomen hid, as if in apology, a dark reddish triangle of hair that reminded her of some skulking animal.

White-faced images with bright red hair, floated before her eyes, and she blinked, chasing them away. Across the seat from her, her husband's head still reclined. Red and gold lights caressed his face, smoothed his brow. With a final, luxurious pull on his cigarette, he stubbed it out, killing it without even opening his eyes.

They had once made a handsome couple, she with her flaming red hair and arresting sky-blue eyes, he with his sharp, hawkish features and dark skin. But while life had eaten at her, masking her slumped and dull, he had grown sleek and glossy, like a well-fed cat. His dark muscles were still tight and firm, with a generous pelt of black, curly hair; he walked with a casual grace, self-assured, comfortable with his body, even his bald head. He never wore a hat, preferring the sensual feel of hot sunshine on his bare scalp, and he never, never burned, turning nut brown in the summertime.

Once he had admired her, complimented her; holding her arms out from her naked body, he praised and adored her, till her white skin flushed crimson. His brownness

against her paleness was exotic to both of them; his hands on her body were hungry, his greed was like liquor; it set her blood on fire.

But now, no matter how expensively she dressed, no matter the skill with which she applied cosmetics or dressed her hair, she could no longer hold his attention. His eyes took in her efforts in one swift glance and dismissed them. He found fault with her habits, with her posture, with the way she walked across a floor or bent to pick up his shoes. Beside him, she was a hulking mass of pastiness, awkward, ugly, an absurd caricature of a woman, a cartoon.

The reflection stared at her, mournful, trapped. Its eyes pleaded; she couldn't escape their gaze. If she looked away and then glanced back, those hollowed eyes watched her the tired, haunted eyes of a prisoner.

The limo slowed, sensing obstacles. Carnival lights flickered on milling humanity on the sidewalks, the streets, pouring from bathhouses. The flashing strobes of police units hardly made a smear against the gaudy glitter. A raid took place right beside her window, played out in silence like some old flickering film. Bodies were flung against the car, rebounding onto the street; the limo shifted delicately. Beyond the flailing arms and shiny helmets, she saw her face mirrored in the polished glass of the buildings and reflected in the windows of the police units.

White faces darted across her mind's eye, dark mouths open like those of bawling children, and she closed her eyes tightly, willing them away.

A memory surfaced, unbidden: a knock-kneed child, lost in a rickety hall of mirrors, an ancient carnival funhouse, lost as only children can be lost, utterly and completely. She was surrounded by herself, by panicky, blotchy, redheaded children, aping her, begging for her help; everywhere, there were wide blue eyes, rimmed with red and dripping tears. The image of her terror was itself terrifying. She fled straight into glass, lurched into her own cold glass arms, until finally, exhausted, beaten, she sat on the metal-mirrored floor and cried, and all around her the flushed-faced replicas, twins of twins of twins of herself, into green infinity, sat in their cages of glass and wept with her as one.

"You're not looking." Her husband's voice was cool as water. Her eyes flew guiltily wide to find his beautiful, clean-lined face studying the sway of a hooker on the sidewalk. "We'll never find a spot if you don't pay attention." His half-lidded gaze followed the hooker out of sight.

She swallowed, struggling to keep her voice even. "I can't find anything. There's too many people."

With an exasperated sigh, he angrily punched in a couple of coordinates, and the limo obligingly nosed through traffic and silent, screaming people, hunting the



desert. His rigid finger on the terminal was like a slap; her body recoiled, imperceptibly; once more, she had disappointed him. She should have been watching for a dark alley, a cubbyhole between the hotels and the casinos, a forgotten dumpster. It was the least she could have done to help him. Now, his original plan spoiled, he would be angry all night. She slumped in her seat, miserable.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

He did not answer.

From the corner of her eye, she watched his scowling silhouette outlined in colored light. He had every right to be upset. The alternate plan was flawed; someone might see them leaving the city. He had thought everything out in great detail; he was always extremely careful that no one thing, no slight bit of evidence could ever be traced back to them. There were never any fingerprints, no traceable murder weapon, no circumstance to send the law cold-tracking to their door. He was her safeguard, and her carelessness had put them both in jeopardy.

His method had developed and straightened over the years. In each new city, he studied the news printouts, hunting for a serial killer or a rough neighborhood with a high after-dark death rate, and from there he wrote the script for the next incident, wrote it in his head, line by line. He would copy the style of a killer, figure a victim's steps, and throw their seed down in the most fertile soil where, undetectable from other deaths, it could take root and grow, one more statistic in the law's latest crop of computer data.

Occasionally, when there were no other established murders to emulate, he sent her out to filch bits of fibers from office buildings or hotel lobbies, or smidgens of wool from the jackets of unsuspecting salesclerks. These webs he laced into auburn hair, or caught delicately on golden eyelashes, like tiny red herrings across the bloodtrail.

Once they'd had a marvelous stroke of luck: strolling on the old Boardwalk, she tripped and fell headlong, raking her nails down the skinny blue-veined legs of an Indiana tourist, drawing a scant bit of blood, trapping the cells of his flesh. She sheltered the stolen cells and brought them to her husband, her hands cupped around her fingertips like a child hiding a gift. He had been ecstatic, though the task of transferring the cells to the quicks of the body had been tricky; he said it made a crime of passion and struggle more realistic, and the DNA linkup would never point to them. He'd even kissed her, a happy smack, making her flush with surprise, and she felt proud to have been such a help to him.

But tonight ... tonight she had turned away, though he ordered her to watch, talking all the while. The rape of the poor mindless creature had been totally unnecessary, but he insisted that there would be detailed investigations. They'd be searching, he said, for signs of sexual assault. There must be trauma.

Obediently, as part of their pact, she observed. This was her part in the drama — the role of accomplice — so that she, too weak to strangle, too squeamish to pull a trigger, would be as deeply involved as he.

She sat in a straight-backed chair, out of the way, while his talk dropped to whispers and then to soft little grunts as he paced himself. His tight brown buttocks made sharp contrast against flabby white skin.

A street kid, a sweet-smiled hustler, had unknowingly donated his semen to their cause, and it lay corked in a

glass vial on the dresser. He had been willing to please her and, teasing the back of her neck with his fingertips, offered to do more for her than she asked. For a moment, his laughing eyes and bony frame tempted her — but daylight was fading, and her husband waited impatiently in the next room. So she shook her head and paid him what she'd promised, and he left her, winking.

She cradled the red herring in her hands, still warm from his scrawny body. She held the vial of liquid to the light and watched it cling creamy to the sides of the glass, while her husband, oblivious to her presence, worked his beautiful muscles like a fine machine, like some sort of engine seeking purchase in fine white sand.

There was some small pang of regret — whether for herself, for the street kid, or for the drooling red-haired figure on the bed, she couldn't tell — as she handed over the vial to her sweating husband. He loaded a sterile syringe with the contents in the vial and shot it deep into the body on the yellowed sheets.

And then, when his brown hands moved to the crepey white neck, her own hands, hangnailed and red, shielded her eyes from the sight.

She'd seen her own face, mauled. She'd seen her own body, shot. She'd seen her own freckled flesh covered with bruises like clumsy smudges of ink on fine white stationery. Her name was on countless marriage licenses, on innumerable death certificates and insurance claims. By heart failure, stroke, smoke inhalation, disease, dismemberment, and drowning; she'd seen herself die, only to be reborn and die again in little red-haired copies of herself. Pudgy and pale, fed through IVs, severely retarded with massive overdoses of standard growth accelerators. Muscles atrophied and loose, they lay still, slobbering silently in a dark room.

She fed them. She turned them. She clipped their nails and cleaned their messes, while he studied the news and checked night spots for suitability, befriending bartenders and insurance salespeople. Only around biological age fourteen, when the creature began to mature, would he begin to lay plans, arranging the next wedding. The two of them would go out together, have a drink, marry in some nondescript chapel, and drop by an insurance office to set up policies. "It's so fortunate that I met you," her husband would purr to the smiling, nodding salesperson, and she would smile, too, signing her name.

Another shot of accelerator in the IV, and the things in the dark would begin to age, each day bringing some new change. He had devised ingenious motor stimulators that could be folded into a suitcase. Electric shocks worked the atrophied muscles, they *looked* as if they had spent the last forty-odd years battling the effects of gravity, sitting and standing and walking, carrying a heavy white body through the world. He synthetically wore out the soft flesh, producing in a matter of weeks the ruined effect that time had taken patient decades to erode upon herself. He was an artist: he duplicated her corns, her calluses, her stretched flesh. The muscles took on the exact chafe marks where undergarments might have left permanent creases.

City to city, country to country, the pattern of their life was as erratic as the crazy roadmap of blood vessels beneath her skin. Growing the seed, sowing and reaping the harvest, they'd grown rich off the multiple deaths of herself. He had promised her, long ago, their life would be



PARADISE
1998

one long honeymoon, a soft, elegant, easy honeymoon. She need never work, and he would always be at her side sharing the pleasures of life. His plan was so simple, so brilliant, and his loving so sweet, dark against fair, that she gladly gave him her cells, and tended to the crop they planted with bathtub bioengineering and kitchen sink genetics.

From the first death, they were more bound to each other than either of them had ever hoped to be.

Loving gazes had long soured into stolen glances, sweet nothing into scathing criticisms. As he pulled his affection away from her, he threw himself into the creation of new versions of her. Each specimen came closer and closer to being an exact replica, timeworn, sagging, growing old. Suddenly, she could see herself strapped to the bed, open-mouthed, blue eyes dimmed and blank.

And with each killing, he executed his role of murderer with more zeal, more violence. In killing her clones, he was killing her, over and over and over.

She found the realization came more as a dull surprise.

The face of the last was her own poor defenseless face, her own mouth open in a dark O, her blood drying between her legs. The face floated before her eyes, trapped in black glass, as the limousine shot into the desert.

The moon shone like a rude searchlight as he slid back the deck lid. The body was neatly folded, curled tightly

upon itself. Rigor had taken hold of the muscles, pushing a chubby fist into a sightless eye. Dark bruises made a dirty necklace under its jaw, and its face was grey with blood.

They left the body by the side of the road, huddled in its fetal position.

She turned in her seat, looking back, and saw it staring blindly at her. It was shining white, so white in the moonlight, and its open mouth was like that of an abandoned child, crying.

The limousine, its destination certain in its memory, ran away fast, searching the concealing lights of the city.

Her husband pressed in the lighter button, waited for its seven-second ignition.

She said, "I really don't want to do another one."

The lighter button glowed, service ready. He pressed its stem to his cigarette, cupping fire in his hands.

She said, "Did you hear me?"

He exhaled, and the smoke was torn from the air, a soul dissolved.

He laid his head on the blood-colored velvet and closed his eyes. Suddenly, the brightness of the moon made his profile too sharp, too hawkish, too fine.

"Just one more," he said, and the glaring casino lights began to dance across his face. □

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Boomerangs

(Continued from page 46)

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I have just finished reading the latest issue of *Aboriginal* (No. 24). As usual, I found it highly enjoyable, full of fresh and unusual ideas.

One point that I must bring to your attention is the science described by Mr. Harper in "God's Bullets." I found the story entertaining and imaginative. He carefully outlined a torque-free propulsion device, then forgot about basic physics. If I remember correctly, velocity is a vector quantity, measuring both speed and linear direction. The author should have used a term such as "angular momentum" rather than "circular velocity." Also, "centrifugal force" does not act on the body, merely good ol' inertia trying to keep things moving in straight lines. I was distracted at this point and could not fully enjoy his ending.

On a more positive note, I find the column written by Dr. Metzger top be one of the best non-fiction serials I have read. His entertaining exploits in the "real" world are something I look forward to in each issue, as well as the fiction, reviews, and certainly the beautiful artwork.

Thank you.

Steve Cooke
Stanton, CA

Dear *Aboriginal*:

Just a word to say how much I loved

Ann K. Schwader's poem "Same Song, Different Star" in the Sept.-Oct. issue. Every line is so good that there's *nothing* I would change. I hardly ever think that about something I read.

Keep on carrying poetry; it's a very special delight.

Bonita Kale
Euclid, OH

Greetings:

I picked up my first copy of your magazine because I wanted to know what *Aboriginal SF* is — good stuff! Particularly "Three Boston Artists" by Sarah Smith.

Thank you, and keep up the good work!
Sincerely,

Myrna Ougland
Seattle, WA

Dear Aboriginals,

As far as the Editor's Notes, the color art is definitely a plus, but ultimately it is the fiction which is most important.

If sacrifices must be made to keep the magazine coming, then so be it. I have complete and closed collections of magazines such as *Galileo*, *Vertex*, *Cosmos*, *Odyssey*, and several others. Do what you must, but don't add *Aboriginal* to this list. Thanks.

Sincerely,
John H. Mohr
Somerville, MA

(We have done, and are doing, everything we can to keep and improve on the full-color art. We're celebrating our fourth birthday, and we have no intention of joining those other magazines. — Ed.)

Dear Charles,

Now I know why the Crazy Alien works as publisher at *Aboriginal*, not because he is an alien, but because he is crazy. Who else would put up with an editor who forgets to factor in the cost of labeling the magazine? You say you need to recoup the added cost of baggies, but when you present the numbers on p. 15 you include the cost of the labels, which means you also forgot to factor the cost of the labels into my subscription price. Anyway I like the Crazy Alien so much that I'm willing to send you the full amount you request, this last time. Or'maybe this next-to-last time. (The baggies were added after too many magazines were scrubbed or lost in the mailing process after the other costs were calculated to set the price of the magazine. — Ed.)

Sincerely,
Ruben Zorrilla
Laredo, TX

To the *Aboriginal* Staff —

In response to Mr. Ryan's July-Aug. editorial, I'm glad to see you drop your "full slick" format. Big deal! If some of your readers actually consider this a major criterion for the viability of a publication

(Imagine! "Honey, I really like the material, but it's not shiny anymore!"), then to hell with 'em. Not only do the slick pages seem less durable than your present medium, they have one glaringly distinct disadvantage — the glare! Nothing, or few things, are more annoying than having to angle the page you're reading to avoid the obliterating reflection of your light source. I also wouldn't be surprised to find that slick pages are more environmentally unsound, in the sense of production and recycling. To tell the truth, this reader would love to see *Aboriginal* printed on recycled paper.

Anyhow, you've got my full support — you should dump those bozos who think the slick format important! (We think the current format meets the needs for good reproduction of art and readability of text. — Ed.)

Yours,
Lee Sterling
Austell, GA

Aboriginal SF (esp. Charlie Ryan):
I wish you can afford to go monthly on slick paper! About your artwork: Awesome! Amazing! Fantastic! Never lose it!
About your stories: WOW! Gnarly!

Don't touch a thing!

About my hero Dr. Metzger: Oh, I already said it; he's my hero.

About Mr. Alien Publisher: Finally, someone who shares my wonder at the way humankind does things! And in print too! Amazing!

About Ms. Lucas: I agree with the last Boomerang I read about her. As we college guys say, "Yow! What a babe!" Good column, too.

About Mr. Ryan: Don't give up, man!

And, last but not least, about Ms. Eisen: What's wrong with "expository lumps"? I like knowing how things work, and I get very tired of hearing about them in every review, even the ones without them. I say you should just give them a rating at the end (i.e., one lump for good, five lumps for bad), if you must, so we readers don't have to hear about it all the time. Other than that, however, your reviews are generally good.

Anyway, my soapbox is collapsing and I can't afford another, so I'll end with this: *Aboriginal* rules the Universe!

Obnoxiously,
Damon V. Bryson
Future Nuclear Engineer
Starkville, MS

"Wasn't it guarded?"

"They beat the guards. They were hungry."

Leeds looks down at his plate. He wonders if Glick has eaten breakfast, or if he is simply refusing to eat. "How contaminated was the food, Colonel?"

"Very, sir."

The governor picks up his empty plate and takes it to the sink. There was not that much Spam, not that much pineapple. Mary is still playing with her food. Her hands are crimped from holding the trowel, and she moves them as if they hurt her.

"Shoot them, Colonel."

The colonel blinks. His eyes are the only part of him that has moved. "Sir?"

"Firing squad, Colonel. It will teach a lesson to the others and be a blessing for the condemned. You've seen enough slow death, I think."

"Yes, sir," Glick says doubtfully.

"Well, I have, too."

The colonel salutes and opens the door.

"Colonel Glick?"

He turns. "Yes?"

"Will you ask Flagstaff to send us something?"

"Yes," he says. "I already have."

"What did they say?"

"That they had their own problems."

"Did you tell them we have people starving? Can't you beg them, Colonel?"

There was the can't again, Leeds thinks. CAN'T YOU DO ANYTHING RIGHT?

The colonel looks away. "I have, sir. Believe me."

Leeds takes a deep breath. The colonel swivels on his heel and marches out into the grey day.

When breakfast is over, Mary goes back to the garden. Leeds cleans the kitchen and returns to his office. At noon he goes out to get Mary for lunch and finds that Glick has been waiting for him.

Holes

(Continued from page 5)

been left the same as when they vacationed there as a family. Jerry's room is quintessentially him: rock posters and a star map. Even though the night is cold, the governor stretches out on top of the cheap plaid comforter. He doesn't want to disturb anything, in case the boy, or the ghost of the boy, should come home.

He doesn't expect to sleep, but he does. He dreams that he is making mud castles at the beach. And he dreams that Mary is smashing them.

The chuck-chuck-chuck nudges him awake. He opens his eyes to stare at the pine ceiling. For a long time he lies there as if he were ten years old again on a school day, pretending to his mother that he is asleep.

When his body becomes sore and stiff from the mattress, he gets up, showers, and goes out to his wife. She has already dug four square yards of shallow holes and her hands are bleeding.

"Breakfast, Mary," he says. He leads her into the house and scrubs her hands and face. They eat fried Spam with slices of canned pineapple. Leeds thinks of toast. He remembers the smell of the hot bread, the greasy, salty taste of the butter. He remembers the crispness in his mouth. The Spam feels like mush. The pineapple feels like nothing.

While they are eating, Colonel Glick knocks at the kitchen door. Leeds tells him to come in. "Some breakfast, colonel?"

"Thank you, sir, no. A problem has come up."

"What problem?"

Glick stands just inside the door, in perspective a small man, like man at the wrong end of a telescope. "Some people have broken into the contaminated food dump, sir."

"Completed, sir," he says in a soft voice, as if he is afraid that God might hear. There is a strange tension in his motionless face.

"How many?" Leeds asks.

"Forty-two."

The governor closes his eyes. Chuck. Chuck. Some sounds humans get used to, repetitive sounds, some single-note tones. Hear a sound enough and it becomes, in effect, silence. But the noise that the trowel makes in the earth is one Leeds knows he will always notice.

"See that the bodies are buried."

"Not burned, sir?"

"No," he says harshly. Enough have gone that way. "Not..."

He stops cold, his mouth still ajar. Behind the colonel's back a spot in the western sky is catching flame. The glow brightens until Leeds can no longer look straight at it.

The colonel, his face creased in bewilderment, slowly turns. The soldiers on the road freeze in place.

"The sun," Glick says with soft wonder.

Only the sun. It has pierced the clouds and laid a brassy benediction on the far mountains. Leeds's body unkinks. His knees go soft. In a moment he sits down on the steps.

Next to him Glick stand transfixed. The soldiers at their jeep burst into cheers. And in the yard, the sunlight turning her hair aflame, the burning woman still digs.

"Glick."

The colonel hastily wipes tears from his eyes.

"I've been going over the supplies."

The sun has shattered Glick's mask and Leeds can read the colonel's face easily now. There is awe there, but over that are annoyance and incomprehension. He looks like a man who, upon finding the stone rolled away and Jesus's grave empty, has been asked about the time.

"If we stay here without airdrops, we'll all die eventually. I want you to get the wounded into the trucks. The uninjured can walk. I want you to take the people off the mountain. Take them north to Flagstaff. They'll have to share once the problem's in their laps. I know they're getting supplies from Utah."

"Sir?"

"Get it together now, Colonel. I want you to leave in two days. No later. It'll be a long haul, but there's water on the way. And get me a jeep. You don't need to put much gas in it. A quarter-tank will do. Mary and I will be going back to Phoenix."

Glick sits down heavily on the steps as if an invisible stranger has knocked him off his feet. He stares out where Mary still digs, her back to the glory of the light.

Above the governor's head the clouds are breaking up and scudding east, leaving the sky the deep, clear, unbelievable color of blue enamel.

Glick is still staring hard at Mary. He looks frightened. "It would be illegal for me to evacuate, sir. You're the governor."

Leeds doesn't quite manage a laugh, but he gets out a dry chuckle. The colonel turns his head sharply toward him, a look of hurt on his face.

The governor lays a hand on the colonel's arm. He has never before touched him. Leeds remembers being at a governors' conference a long, long time ago, and he remembers what the governor of Arkansas told him about military coups. *Never happen in the States*, the squat governor had said. *First time they want appropriations*,

they're going to want to go to Congress, and the coup will be over.

American military officers, Leeds knows, need civilian demands. "This is an order, Colonel. Get the people to Flagstaff and surrender to the mayor there."

Glick gets to his feet without saluting and wanders away, his hands in his pockets.

The next morning there is a jeep waiting in front of the cabin. Glick has loaded it with supplies.

"I gave you a half-tank," the colonel says. "That will get you into the worst part of Phoenix and get you most of the way out, if you wish. There are clothes packed in plastic. If you want to leave, drive out of the area as far as the gas will take you, then ditch the jeep. You can walk the rest of the way."

Leeds looks at the flashlight, the cartons of food, the water. Glick has given them too much. The supplies are an excess, so much so that he feels the peculiar guilt of the wealthy.

He goes into the house without saying a word and wakes Mary up. He helps her dress.

When she is dressed, she is frantic. The trowel is not on the nightstand. She pulls the blankets off and looks under the bed. He follows her as she darts from one room to another, hummingbird-quick. A small noise, a sort of whine, is coming from her throat. Leeds tries to stop her, but she flutters and spins out of his hands. "Mary," he says. "Mary." She's not listening.

With a bang she is out the door, sprinting past a startled Glick. In the sun-dried mud of the yard she finds the trowel. She snatches it up and holds it to her breast, curling her body around it.

"Come on, Mary," Leeds says gently.

She is breathing hard with fright. Her eyes are round and animal-blank.

"Come on," he whispers.

He takes her to the jeep. Glick holds out his hand. "Good luck, Governor."

"Good luck," Leeds replies. There should be more to say.

Glick closes the door for him and steps back. Leeds starts the engine and, at a sudden urge, puts his hand out to the colonel again. Instead of taking it, the colonel salutes. It is a good, snappy salute, managed the way salutes used to be.

Ten miles down the mountain at the checkpoint, the soldiers wave them through. Forty miles after that they drive past the first of the abandoned, undamaged houses. The radiation buzzer goes off with a hysterical, electronic whoop, startling Leeds so much he nearly runs off the road. Quickly he reaches down and jerks the wire from the unit.

He looks furtively at Mary. His wife is sitting against her door, the trowel still cradled in her arms. Her gaze is riveted forward, and he wonders how much of this she understands.

"Twelve forty-three, Mary," he says. "They'd have been in school. That's where we'll check."

Ten miles later they get into the first of the damage, the first of the stench. Hell, Leeds decides, must smell of burnt insulation.

It's more difficult finding his way than he had imagined. Into the worst of it, he can't find the road at all. He realizes he has gone too far when he sees their bank

building rising unaccountably from the rubble. In an hour or so, he believes, by the scattering of red bricks and the charred floor of what might have been a gymnasium, he has found Carolyn's middle school.

From that landmark, he drives, in fits and starts, southwest. The east wing of the high school is in ruins, but, miraculously, the west wing still stands, its windows like mouths of splintered teeth. Nothing, not even birds, moves there.

He shuts off the engine. It is very quiet. The sun catches the sparkles of mica in the dusty, dun stone. Except for the limitless blue of the sky, the world is the color of disaster.

Carolyn never had a chance, but Jerry and Jimmy might have. Leeds is not sure where their classrooms were. He hopes they were in the east wing where it would have been quick, and not in the west where they might have lingered.

When children are afraid, fathers should always be there.

Grief hits like the incapacitating ache of angina. It is only much later that he realizes that Mary is weeping. The trowel has dropped, forgotten, to her lap.

"Should we go see?" she asks.

Leeds is surprised by her voice. It is almost, but not quite, the way he remembers it.

He looks at the stark skeleton of the school and shudders. After all this time he doesn't have the courage to go further. He doesn't want to know what secrets lurk for him behind the quiet, blasted stone. "I don't think it would be a good idea."

"Can we go home now?"

Leeds watches the wind weave mists of dust across the ruins. "No."

He starts up the engine. Turning the jeep in a difficult three-corner turn, he heads back the way they came.

"They're dead," she says.

"Yes."

He sees the tightness leave her as abruptly as his grief had come on. Her back unhinges. She slumps. The trowel drops to the floor and she doesn't pick it up.

He stops for the night in one of the undamaged houses in a high-rad zone. They eat a silent dinner. Mary goes in and lies down on the strange bed.

They'll die here, surrounded by someone else's things.

When night falls he comes in and sits beside her, holding her hand in the night. She is sleeping soundly for the first time in months.

As he keeps watch he notices a pale glow coating the sill. It is the returning moon. He pictures the silvered blanket it is casting over the graves of their children.

He should be brave enough and able enough to find their bodies, but everyone has his limitations. He simply can't.

Their entire lives have been structured of can'ts.

JIMMY, CAN'T YOU CLEAN THAT ROOM?

DADDY, CAN'T YOU LOAN ME...? CAN'T YOU BUY ME...? CAN'T YOU TAKE ME...? CAN'T YOU GIVE ME...?

He had come at last to look, too late to be of use. Now he clutches his inconclusive answers. Of all the can'ts that ever were, he realizes, only one has meaning.

Can't you forgive us? he asks. □

Appliance

By Bruce Bethke

By Robert J. Pasternak

Good morning, Barbara," the soft, pleasant, sexless voice said. "Time to rise and shine." When there was no reply in sixty seconds, Snoozealarm tried again. "Good morning, Barbara. Please wake up."

John got one eye sort of half-open, gave some consideration to waking up, then slid his hand around Barbara's tummy and snuggled in closer, burying his nose in the back of her neck.

The clock's voice became a bit more insistent. "This is the third call, Barbara. Please wake up. It is already 7:02."

Her long, blond hair smelled *wonderful*. He ran his fingers across the curve of her hip and down her thigh; she responded with a soft, throaty sigh ...

"Barbara Lynn Murphy!" Snoozealarm shrieked. "If you don't wake up this very insta —"

"I'm awake." She started disentangling herself from John's arms and pushing back the blankets.

"Snuggle one more minute?" John suggested.

"Afraid not." Yawning, she sat up on the edge of the bed and started working the kinks out of her neck.

"It's a lovely morning, Barbara!" Snoozealarm said

cheerfully. "The current temperature is 56, with a predicted high today in the low 70s. The air pollution index is low to moderate, but there is a 60 percent chance of rain in the late afternoon, so be sure to take your umbrella." Barbara pulled on her terrycloth robe and wandered into the bathroom.

"The regularly scheduled breakfast for Friday is orange juice, wheat toast, coffee, and mushroom/cheese omelets. Do you approve, Barbara?"

"Yes," John said.

Thirty seconds later Snoozealarm said, "I'm waiting for your okay on breakfast, Barbara."

"It'll be fine," John said.

Another thirty seconds later Snoozealarm said, "The regularly scheduled breakfast for Friday is —"

"BARBARA!"

She stepped out of the bathroom. "What's wrong, honey?" John just scowled and pointed at the alarm clock.

"Oh. Yes. That's fine."

"Thank you," Snoozealarm said.

"Barb," John asked. "How come that thing still won't

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take orders from me?"

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I keep meaning to have it reprogrammed."

"Well, I'm getting a little tired of waiting, you know?"

"I said I was sorry."

"I mean, we've only been living together for six months now," John continued. "Don't you think it's time you let your house know?"

Barbara's back stiffened. "There's no need to get nasty."

"I'm not being nasty. I'm being *hurt* because I still feel like your Man of the Weekend."

"It's improving, isn't it?" she snapped. "At least Snoozealarm doesn't call you Larry anymore."

A furious look flashed into John's eyes as he jumped out of bed. "You leave *him* out of this!"

Barbara ran into the bathroom and slammed the door. In a few seconds John heard the shower come on, so he gave up trying to talk at her through the locked door, pulled his robe on, and went to see if he could get a cup of coffee. As he walked into the kitchen, he mumbled, "Good morning," and winced in anticipation.

"Good morning, Larry!" the appliances sang out. Snoozealarm had passed along the word, as a good NEC MajorDomot was supposed to, for they were all merrily churning away: Mr. Coffee, La Chef Food Processaire, Jiffy Skillet, Warren Waring the Blender, even stolid old Fridge. Then poor little Toaster, always the slowest of the bunch, urgently and nervously said, "Good morning, sir."

"Coffee ready yet?" John asked.

The coffee maker answered in a rich, masculine Colombian-accented voice, "Not yet, but soon, Larry." *Strike two*. Shaking his head, John stepped over to the den, put his hand on the doorknob, and hesitated a moment to summon his courage.

Entering the den always involved a strange mix of eagerness and dread. On the one hand, he had to enter the room to talk to Denny, and he liked Denny; the nexus of the HomeNetwork and gateway to the outside world was dependable, efficient, and best of all, completely impersonal.

On the other hand, Barbara's collection was in there.

There was nothing to do but get it over with. Gritting his teeth, he opened the door.

Being light-sensitive, the meadowlarks were the first to start up. They in turn triggered the sound-activated canaries, and as John charged in stabbing OFF buttons he jostled the Elvis shelf again and the five touch-sensitive dolls, representing the five stages of His career, started singing their five unstoppable two-minute songs. John got to the X-rated Eddie Murphy doll in time, and caught most of the unrecognizables before they really got going, but he was flummoxed by the new one. There was always a new one; Barbara couldn't pass up novelties. That's why she'd bought into this totally wired townhouse development in the first place, and why she'd insisted they rent out John's restored Victorian brownstone after they'd decided to move in together.

Picking up the new unrecognizable and turning it over — in the process triggering it, of course — he realized it was a four-headed Beatles doll and there was no way to stop it from singing all two-hundred and thirty-three choruses of "Hey Jude." So he shoved it into the closet.

The Elvies were almost finished. He waited them out,

then allowed himself a moment of smugness as the room settled down into the soft patter of electronic frogs and crickets shutting down. Of course, as soon as Barbara found out she would frantically turn them all back on, but for the moment he felt an incredible sense of accomplishment. He stepped back to survey the room, and triggered the singing chipmunks.

They started violently bickering in helium-squeaky three-part harmony. John bit his lower lip and fought the urge to scream "Alvin!" three times. After all, that's what they were waiting for, and he'd be damned if he was going to kowtow to a bunch of witless silicon. Moving out of their range, he waited until they timed out. Then he again surveyed the shelves of silent knick-knacks and turned to the desktop computer.

The printout basket was empty. "Denny!" he barked.

"On," said the computer.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Then where's my newsprint?"

"Display."

"Huh?" Sometimes Denny could be laconic to the point of obscurity. It took John a full minute to realize Denny was telling him to look at the display screen, and another minute to remember how to turn the screen on. As soon as the screen came up, though, the ***NETWORK ERROR*** message appeared, along with the clarification: *interruption in BuildingSys at 07:17 ... all CityNet services temporarily out ... HomeNet synchronization lost ... all home modules now in local mode ... sorry for the inconvenience ...*

"Damn!" John spat. "Third data outage this year?" He stomped furiously out of the den. "Who wired this dump?!" he bellowed, "Migrant lettuce pickers in the off-season? *Barb?* This house of yours — "

The bizarre noise and awful smell first stopped him in his tracks, then made him break into a run.

In the kitchen he found a disaster in progress. Jiffy Skillet was frying shredded oranges, Toaster was belching smoke, Warren Waring was trying to juice eggs, and all the appliances were shrieking error messages at top volume. Viscous yellow egg goo was oozing down the sides of the blender and spreading out in a thick puddle on the counter top; a second later it found the crack between the counter and the fridge and began slithering down. Six months of living with Toaster had conditioned John to the smell of cremated bread, and now that he could see the skillet he recognized the smell of burning oranges, but a third nuance in the stench puzzled him until he watched La Chef dump freshly ground coffee into the skillet.

Mister Coffee was brewing cheese.

Once he got over the smell, the noise hit him again. Skillet and La Chef were stuck in a call-and-response routine; both had voice-operated troublefinders and each time La Chef shouted, "Assistance, s'il vous plaît!" Skillet answered, "Gosh, what a mess!" Since this wasn't a valid response, La Chef kept shouting. Meanwhile, Mr. Coffee was muttering, "I think something is amiss," Toaster was bleated, "I'm stuck! I'm stuck!" and the smoke kept getting thicker.

Barbara burst into the kitchen, hair dripping. "What did you do to them?"

John grabbed Toaster and began jabbing the eject button. "I didn't do anything! The cable's gone flaky





again!" Toaster wasn't surrendering, so John held it upside down and shook it violently.

"I'm stuck! I'm stuck!"

"Put him down!" Barbara demanded. "And what's the cable got to do with it?" John plunked Toaster down on the counter top and pulled open the silverware drawer.

"These things are all supposed to network with Denny," John said as he found a butter knife, "but they've lost sync." Barbara realized what he was planning.

"No!" She tried to grab the knife from John's hand, but he wrenched it away. The momentum drove the blade through the charred toast and into something vital. There was a bright blue spark; John swore, dropped everything, and started sucking his thumb; Toaster gave one last shrill little screech and went silent.

"Christ," sobbed Barbara, "you killed Toaster!" She picked up the inert appliance and cradled it in her arms.

"The toaster? How about I damn near killed myself?"

"You always hated Toaster!"

"Barb, that thing shouldn't have been a toaster. It was a frustrated smoke alarm." With his free hand, John reached for Mr. Coffee's plug. A look of horror flashed across Barbara's face; she threw her shoulder into John's side, blocking him.

"Don't touch that!"

"How else am I supposed to stop it?" They struggled briefly over the cord, and John came up the winner, but a few seconds too late. The coffee maker erupted like a cheddar Vesuvius, spraying scorched and bubbling molten cheese on the walls, the ceiling, John ... luckily, his bathrobe caught the worst of it.

"You did that on purpose!" Barbara shrieked. John pulled a few taffy strings of cheese out of his hair and then yanked La Chef's plug. The food processor shut down with a guttural squawk. "Stop it! You're hurting them!"

"Dammit, Barbara, they don't feel! They don't think! They're just silicon chips!"

"You beast!" Barbara screeched. "You're the one with no feelings! You hate my kitchen! You hate my collection!" She stopped trying to hold back her tears. "You probably even hate me!" Clutching her poor dead toaster, unable to stop John's unplugging rampage, she ran back into the bathroom and slammed the door.

"Oh ... fudge," John said, with some effort. He pulled the plug on Skillet, then followed Barbara. "Honey, I — honey? Please unlock this door."

"Go away!"

"Barb, you're being pretty juvenile about this."

"You disgust me!"

Biting back an angry retort, John stomped into the bedroom, tore off the bathrobe, and threw it into a corner, then stuffed his business clothes into his gym bag. He could wash up in the exercise room; if his boss didn't like the time he sat down at his desk that'd be just too damn bad. He stopped in the kitchen long enough to dump the burnt oranges into the compactor — which solemnly announced, "The garbage is full," and began singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" — then slammed the door as he left.

He's gone, Barbara. You can come out now." Barbara opened the bathroom door a crack and cautiously peered out. Reassured that John was gone, she opened the door the rest of the way. "Can we talk?" Snoozealarm

asked.

Barbara nodded glumly. "It's about John, isn't it?"

"John has a serious compatibility problem. He resists integration with the HomeNet."

"I've noticed," Barbara said dejectedly. She walked over to the bed and flopped onto it. "What do you think I should do?"

"Larry did not have this problem," Snoozealarm pointed out.

"But Larry was so *dull*," Barbara protested.

"He was also reliable. The cable has been restored; John's six-month performance review has just come in. Would you like to hear it?"

"I suppose I'd better. In summary, please." She rolled over onto her back and ran her fingers through her wet hair.

Snoozealarm took a few seconds to prepare the summary. "The gist of it is, his market projections are as good as or better than Larry's. However, his aggressive personality has led to severe conflicts with his co-workers, and you have been given thirty days to correct the problem or face termination of your contract."

"Damn!" Barbara punched the mattress.

"This is a frequent problem with liberated artificial intelligences," Snoozealarm noted. "They tend to develop assertive and territorial behaviors."

"It's my fault," Barbara muttered. "I thought it would be fun if my android didn't *know* he was an android." She punched the mattress again. "Damn! That John software was so expensive! All those simulated memories. And that perception filter, so he wouldn't notice that all his co-workers are androids!"

"Sentience is a questionable feature in a primary breadwinner unit, Barbara."

She sat up on the bed and sighed heavily. "Don't I know it. Okay, call AndroServ. Tell them to reinstall the Larry software ASAP. Damn!" Barbara slid off the bed and walked into the bathroom, looking for a towel.

By the time she'd dried off and was ready to shave her legs, Snoozealarm had made the connection. "I have AndroServ on-line," the clock said. "Will today at noon do, Barbara?"

"If that's the soonest they can get to him." She paused and pursed her lips. "Look, they won't — hurt him, will they? He won't know what's happening to him?"

Snoozealarm paused to exchange data with AndroServ. "In special cases like this they use an ultrasonic remote shutoff. No, John will not be aware of this."

"That's very important to me," Barbara continued. "Tell them I want a complete backup of John. Everything in his memory, right up to this morning. And after they archive him, I want them to update his world events memory every Friday." She smiled, sadly, and picked up the bladeless razor John had used every morning for the last six months. "I may want to have a weekend affair with him, every now and then. Larry really is *so dull*." She sighed, and tossed the razor in the wastebasket. "But a girl's got to eat."

Snoozealarm completed the call, and the AndroServ technicians showed up at John's office at noon as promised. That night, Larry came home to Barbara. He'd been gone for six months, but he didn't notice that little detail. In fact, he didn't notice much of anything.

Barbara's house was much happier. □

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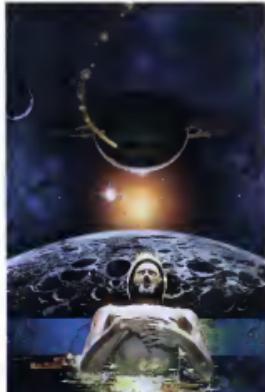
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